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A Crisis of Faith:
The Political Discourse of Evangelicalism After Trump

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Abstract

From the moment Donald Trump announced his intention to run as president of the United States, there were some who thought it would inevitably lead to the end of the alliance between white evangelicals and the Republican Party. We now know that this would not happen, and that more evangelicals would vote for Trump than for any Republican candidate previously. The following thesis seeks to examine the reasons for this and the extent to which it might be subject to political intervention and realignment in the future. Previous analyses and explanations for the rise of the religious right tend to replicate an essentialist paradigm with regards to evangelicalism that inadequately accounts for its historical discontinuities and contingencies and can lead to a position of political intractability. Instead, I propose to use a critical approach that derives from the post-Marxist framework of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, the value of which I will proceed to demonstrate by interrogating two key moments in the articulation of evangelical discourse: the formation of the religious right in the 1970s and the response to the crisis that followed Trump's election.

Acknowledgements

For a variety of reasons, I can hardly believe that I am in the position to write an acknowledgements page to a PhD thesis. That I in fact am, is certainly due to the people who I have encountered over the course of this journey. At each stage of my career, there were two academics who especially influenced the direction it would take: at undergraduate level, it was Mark Bendall and Franc Donohoe; at postgraduate, Anthony Purvis and Shaun Moores; and at doctoral level, it has been David Howarth and Jason Glynos. Both the department of government and the centre for ideology and discourse analysis at the University of Essex have been an inspiring and stimulating base from which to conduct doctoral research and brought me into contact with too many excellent people to list by name, but who have undoubtedly assisted me in countless ways. I probably would not have been at the University of Essex at all if it was not for my initial meeting with Michael Bailey in the department of sociology. And my experience would certainly not have been as enjoyable if it was not for the other researchers and staff that I encountered through the IDA programme and summer school. I would specifically like to thank in this respect Ryan Flitcroft, Craig Love, Kostis Roussos, Yannis Stavrakakis, Joash Tapiheru, Jimena Vazquez, and Thomás Zicman de Barros, as well as Paul Bou-Habib, James Christensen, Laura Montanaro, and Aletta Norval in the wider Essex community. Outside of the IDA world are two close friends and colleagues who have been especially important to me over the last few years and to each of whom I owe a debt of gratitude for the influence and impact they have had in my life: Christopher Huggins at the University of Cambridge and Simo Frestadius at the Institute for Pentecostal Theology, Regents College.

Finally, there are more things in heaven and earth than academic research and I am looking forward to rediscovering them over the coming months with my wife and partner, Hannah Huntly. I dedicate this thesis to her.

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List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

CT   *Christianity Today*

ERA   Equal Rights Amendment

HEW   United States Department of Health, Education, and Welfare

IRS   United States Internal Revenue Service

ISR   Imaginary-Symbolic-Real

NAE   National Association of Evangelicals

SCOTUS   Supreme Court of the United States

US   United States of America

WHCF   White House Conference on the Family (1980)

Introduction:

A Crisis of Faith

Context and scope

The election of Donald Trump as the 45th president of the United States precipitated something of a crisis for evangelical Christians. Evangelicals are theologically conservative Protestants who tend to identify as "Bible-believing" or "born again" and have been a mainstay of the Republican Party's electoral coalition since the Carter-Reagan election in 1980 (Martin 1996; Williams 2010). This alignment is conventionally perceived as part of a wider phenomenon in which socially conservative and religious values have assumed increasing salience in the political culture of the United States since the 1970s, the most important of which has been for some time that which relates to abortion and the Supreme Court ruling on *Roe v. Wade* (1973) (Flippen 2011; Hunter 1992; Layman 2001; Mourão Permoser 2019). One of the reasons that a Trump candidacy posed a problem to evangelicals, at least initially, was that in order to achieve the nominations necessary to reverse this decision, it required that they vote for a candidate whose behaviour to date appeared less than consistent to everything they ostensibly believed (Butler 2021; du Mez 2021; Fea 2020); but the reason that this would become a fully blown crisis once he was elected to office was that white evangelicals ultimately *did* vote for him, and in numbers beyond that of George W. Bush or Ronald Reagan (Bailey 2016). Indeed, when it was reported that no less than 81% of white evangelicals had polled in favour of Trump at the presidential election, it triggered an incitement to discourse of such soul-searching, buck-passing, and pontification about what it meant to be an evangelical in light of this result that it threatened to develop into an organic crisis of Gramscian proportions, thus threatening evangelicalism's long-term viability as a subject of religious and political identity (c.f. Bailey 2018, Beaty 2018, Ditmer 2018, Green 2016, Labberton 2018, Noll *et al.* 2019, Smith 2018). Some commentators began to predict a potential rupture in the alliance

between white evangelical Christians and the Republican Party, and tropes of crisis, crack-up, fracture and fissure were repeatedly deployed (e.g. Ditmer 2018, Djupe and Claasen 2018, Du Mez 2021, Kidd 2019, Labberton 2018, Noll *et al.* 2019).

And yet no lasting rupture occurred. That it ultimately did not is the topic of this thesis, which, over the course of three separate papers, will attempt to address the following question: why did the identity crisis precipitated by Trump fail to alter the longstanding political alignment between white evangelicals and the Republican Party, despite widespread predictions that it would? This will necessitate an investigation and discussion of the ideological reasons behind the evangelical support of the Republican Party, the structural and discursive logics that have sustained this alignment for so long, and whether this alignment is likely to persist in future. To answer these questions, it will draw primarily on the resources of the post-Marxist framework associated with the work of Ernesto Laclau and the school of ideology and discourse analysis he developed while based at the University of Essex (c.f. Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Laclau 1990, 1996, 2005). However, to better comprehend its reasons for doing so, it will first discuss the wider context to be found within the relevant literature.

Review of literature

The present study is situated in and contributes to three distinct but overlapping streams of literature: political science, sociology of religion, and religious history.

I will begin with the last because it is generally from the history of religion and religious studies that we find the key contributors to the discourse of crisis that was articulated in the weeks, months, and years immediately following Trump's win and which will be the general context for the project as a whole. Paradigmatic of this literature is the collection of essays and commentary edited by Mark Noll, George Marsden, and David Bebbington, which aggregated the most

representative contributions to this discourse and therefore serves to an extent as an archive of the discourse in that moment (Noll *et al.* 2019). A second reason that it has such paradigmatic status is that its three editors have each impacted the way in which evangelicalism has been defined both in an academic context and more widely, constituting what we might see as the first wave of evangelical historiography that responded to its formation as a political subject in the 1970s (see Bebbington 1988; Marsden 1980, 2007; Noll 1994; c.f. Sutton 2017a, 2017b). This followed the initial recognition of white evangelicals as an electoral force in the United States following the Carter-Ford election of 1976, but it was their switch to the Republicans in 1980 that created an immediate demand for scholarship that could help explain the re-entry of "old-time religion" into the field of mainstream politics (Sutton 2017b).

Marsden's 1980 text, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, was the first to substantially answer that call. Even its title is an indication of how contingent and undecidable the category of "evangelical" still was in that moment (c.f. Fisher 2016; Hart 2005; Sutton 2017a), with much uncertainty at the time as to whether it was appropriate to use the older, more established category of "fundamentalist" or the newer, more media-friendly category of "evangelical". Marsden famously once defined evangelicals as "anyone who likes Billy Graham", the renowned evangelist whose influence touched some of the most important institutions of the modern evangelical movement (Martin 2008; Pollock 2003). But it is Marsden's co-editor David Bebbington who has perhaps done most to provide a standardized definition in his text, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britian* (1988), despite it having very little to say about the United States at all. Bebbington defined evangelicalism as a continuous historical subject according to four core features:

> *conversionism*, the belief that lives need to be changed; *activism*, the expression of the gospel in effort; *biblicism*, a particular regard for the Bible; and what may be called *crucicentrism*, a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. Together they form a quadrilateral of priorities that is the basis of Evangelicalism. (Bebbington 1988: 2-3)

Now widely known as the "Bebbington quadrilateral", it has become a base of decontestation (Freeden 1996, 2003) from which scholars such as Noll and institutions such as the National Association of Evangelicals have attempted to resist identification with Trump. The implication (and sometimes explicit claim) has been that most of those who were polled in 2016 were misappropriating the term as an indicator of conservative politics (Kidd 2019; Noll 2018). However, one significant effect of this claim, as I argue in the first of the three papers, is that it excessively depoliticizes the problem of Trump in evangelical discourse, implying an equivalence between evangelicals who supported him and those who morally opposed him, effectively repressing the underlying political antagonism and fundamentally distorting the capacity to make sense of Trump's evangelical support as a social and political phenomenon. A second effect of this, as I discuss in paper two, is that it excessively essentializes the theological character of evangelical identity and distorts our capacity to account for the historical contingencies and discontinuities within its discourse, further rendering it ineffective in explaining recent social and political developments. Despite the flaws in its argument, it is a claim that has been repeatedly articulated by evangelical scholars (as well as scholars of evangelicalism), preachers, and popular writers, all of whom have a professional stake in recuperating and consolidating the Bebbington definition and distancing themselves from association with Trump and Republican partisanship. I discuss in some detail why this strategy of problematization is ultimately misjudged in the second half of paper one. For the time being, I will focus on the two main responses to be found in the relevant literature, the first of which does so using a framework of religious structuration or "divide" and is located in the literature of the social sciences, the second of which articulates its critique within a paradigm of essential contestability and is situated within the humanities.

Religious structuration and division. One of the most conclusive responses to the claim made by evangelicals that only nominals voted for Trump in 2016 was articulated by the political scientist Michele Margolis in a 2020 paper titled, "Who wants to make America great again? Understanding Evangelical Support for Donald Trump" (Margolis 2020). Contrary to such claims, Margolis found that not only did support for Trump in the general election tend to be stronger among practicing evangelicals than it did among nominal, but that the more "devout" they tended to be, the stronger their support tended towards Trump *(Ibid.)*. And yet this was hardly the case in Trump's primary campaign, where most who scored high on Margolis' scale wanted "anyone but Trump" as the Republican nominee. Where Margolis' argument encounters some difficulty therefore is in its capacity to fully explain why evangelicals that measured highest in devotion subsequently became Trump's most enthusiastic supporters rather than registering their dissatisfaction. Her solution to this is in some ways a good one and draws on concepts—such as negative partisanship and affective polarization—which potentially are not incompatible with the post-Marxist approach I will be taking here. Where Margolis' position differs to that of the post-Marxist, however, is in its need for an essentialist conception of evangelical belief and practice in order to refute the initial claim. Moreover, this is a consistent feature throughout the literature on which she draws and in which her wider project is located (Margolis 2019; c.f. Abramowitz and Webster 2016; Green 2010; Hunter 1992; Layman 1997, 2001); I further argue that this element of residual essentialism in the literature of the religious divide is an inheritance of its earliest and most foundational texts (e.g. Hunter 1992; Wuthnow 1988b, 1996).

The concept of a religious divide in US politics owes much to the thesis of religious restructuring in the work of Robert Wuthnow, which purports to explain the increased salience of socially conservative values on political behaviour from the 1970s onwards as an antagonism born of an essential difference between those who hold mainly to religious values and those who hold mainly to secular (Wuthnow, *op. cit.*). In constructing his thesis, however, Wuthnow had partly drawn on the earlier work of the cultural sociologist, James Davison Hunter, and specifically his

research on evangelicals, from which the latter would later construct his thesis of "culture war" depicted in similarly essentialist terms (Hunter 1983, 1987, 1992). And yet there are a number of fundamental issues in the way that this study is conceived and which I address in my critique of Hunter's conceptual framework during the course of paper two; the most relevant of which for the present discussion is that he derived his definition of evangelicalism in large part from the early wave of evangelical historians, many of whom were, if not precisely evangelical themselves, then at least very closely connected to the movement (*Ibid.*; Sutton 2017b). And while the essentialist assumptions inherent to this first wave of historiography more recently critiqued by historians such as Matthew Avery Sutton and Linford Fisher (Fisher 2016; Sutton 2017a), these developments in the history of religion and religious studies have not fully caught up with those working in political and social sciences, which for the most part still refer to the theologically essentialist definitions of Marsden and Bebbington (Margolis 2019, 2020). This then is one part of the contribution that I believe the present thesis will make. To do this, however, it will first have to engage with the dominant framework by which the Bebbington quadrilateral has begun to be criticised.

Evangelicalism as an essentially contested concept. In his review of recent trends in evangelical historiography, Sutton identifies signs of essentialism in the way in which early scholarship narrativized the "rise and fall and rise again" of American evangelicalism. Between the work of Marsden and his student Joel Carpenter, he says, the "rise-fall-rebirth narrative has dominated the literature on twentieth-century American religion [and] has become so ingrained in textbooks that most religion scholars and historians simply assume it is indisputable." (Sutton 2017b: 240) Sutton draws our attention to three interventions in recent years—his own being one of them—all of which, I will argue, demonstrate aspects of commensurability with the post-Marxist approach but,

if left under-theorised, remain vulnerable to refutation and recuperation by the dominant paradigm.

The first of these is by Linford Fisher, who similarly acknowledges the inherent essentialism of the dominant paradigm, but includes the work of David Bebbington in his assessment too, and cites the quadrilateral definition as the "prime example" of an "essentialist" or "doctrinal" understanding that has been the "default definition for scholars and political commentators" since the 1970s (Fisher 2016: 185). Its principal flaw, he argues, is that it projects an "uninterrupted continuity with the past in service of the present" (*ibid.*); that which was meant by the term in the late nineteenth century, he says, differed from that which was meant by its use in the 1940s, when the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) was founded. Medieval use, for instance, was widespread and relatively indiscriminate, but it was following the Protestant Reformation that the word began to take on the anti-Catholic inflection that it has retained up to the present, even if it would continue to have a place in Catholic discourse for centuries to come (*Ibid.*: 188-9). In its literal sense, "evangelical" refers to the evangelion or "good news" of the gospel, but words are never reducible to their literal sense alone – as Laclau and Mouffe remind us, literality is the first of all metaphors (1985). Indeed, there is something reminiscent of Laclau and Mouffe in the way that Fisher depicts the category of evangelical as a "Protestant-inflected way of being in the world" rather than a fixed doctrinal position (Fisher 2016: 186); an equivalential identity, if you like, which by the late 1890s "had come to encompass almost every single Protestant group" in North America (*Ibid.*: 188). In short:

> To be "evangelical" meant different things to different people across time and space, and its meanings and usages changed over time. Nineteenth-century "evangelical" concerns were different from twentieth-century concerns, which were both different from those of the eighteenth century. Our understanding of the use of the word "evangelical" must, at minimum, accurately reflect these changes over time and varying contexts. We need to

recognize that "evangelical" was almost always a polemical, contested, and constructed term and idea rather than something objectively existing in a timeless past. (*Ibid.*: 187)

The second critique of the Bebbington-Marsden paradigm is to be found in a fascinating social history of mid-century evangelicalism and its connection to modern marketing, *Guaranteed Pure*, by Timothy Gloege (Gloege 2015; c.f. Kruse 2016; Sutton 2017b). While Gloege sees the Bebbington criteria as "a helpful encapsulation of conservative evangelical self-understanding", he nevertheless believes it relies too heavily on evangelical self-perception to be useful for analysis and that it "perpetuates their theological judgements" of other doctrinal positions (Gloege 2015: 12): "the implication of this definition is that nonevangelicals treat the Bible carelessly, reject conversion, fail to act on their faith, and largely disregard the death of Jesus" (*Ibid.*). Sutton makes a similar point in his text, *American Apocalypse: A History of Modern Evangelicalism*, when he suggests that early historians of evangelicalism were prone to accepting "the narratives of their subjects" (2017a: xiv). Contrary to historians such as Marsden or Noll, Sutton sees no reason to accept modern evangelicalism's own characterization of itself as substantially different to the fundamentalism of the early twentieth century, perceiving their appropriation of the older category of evangelical as simply a pragmatic case of public relations: "By the 1940s, many of the men and women who had built the fundamentalist movement determined that the label 'fundamentalist' was doing more harm than good, so they dropped it. They replaced 'fundamentalist' with the older, more historic term 'evangelical'." (*Ibid.*: x)

Sutton's is a perspective that reflects the increasingly contextual and less essentialist analytical approach deployed by recent religious historiography, and which is present too in Fisher and Gloege (Sutton 2017b). Just as there is something akin to Laclau and Mouffe's logic of equivalence and difference in Fisher's depiction of evangelicalism as an equivalential but polemical construct, or something akin to the Foucauldian "history of the present" in his critique of

Bebbington's "attempt to create uninterrupted continuity with the past in service of the present" (Fisher 2016: 185), there is something in the way in which Sutton unsettles the essential linearity of "the Marsden-Carpenter rise-fall-rebirth narrative" that brings to mind the method of problematization conceived in the logics approach (Sutton 2017a: xiii; c.f. Glynos and Howarth 2007).

So far, however, these points of intersection and commensurability between the new historiography and the post-Marxist approach to discourse have remained unrealized and under-developed. By far the most dominant framework from which recent scholars have critiqued the early historiographical narrative of Marsden and Bebbington—as well as to make sense of the post-Trump evangelical "crisis"—is the framework of essential contestability derived from W. B. Gallie (1955; c.f. e.g Butler and du Mez 2018; c.f. Noll *et al.* 2019); but it is a derivation that remains mostly implicit, rooted in the sedimented discourse of the humanities rather than detailed engagement with relevant literature (e.g. c.f. Connolly 2012, Freeden 1996, MacIntyre 1973). As a result, it remains vulnerable to the conventional criticisms to which the concept of contestability has long been subject: to wit, that it is a gateway to normative relativity and conceptual confusion inimical to its productive application or analysis (see Collier *et al.* 2006; c.f Freeden 1996). Indeed, this is the path taken by Noll in his response to the discourse of crisis and contestability which he wrote for the website of the NAE and has subsequently formed the basis of his introduction to the collection edited with Bebbington and Marsden. Acknowledging a certain "flexibility" in the way that the words "evangelical" and "evangelicalism" have been traditionally used, Noll still believes that:

> ambiguity is not the only possibility. When used with responsible attention to history and careful focus on generally accepted norms of the Bebbington definition, they can still communicate reality and not just confusion. (Noll 2018)

In addition to his reference and paraphrasing of Bebbington, Noll suggests that, "[t]he website of the National Association of Evangelicals is one of the best places to view such clarifying specificity." (*Ibid.*) The relationship between the intellectual and institutional stakes could not be clearer, but it is indicative too of how vulnerable the framework of essential contestability can be to institutional demands for conceptual clarity and "unity". I will say more about this in paper one; for now, I will merely highlight the need that this indicates for a robust theoretical response to the crisis of evangelical discourse.

A post-Marxist approach to evangelical discourse

I find the makings of this response in the post-Marxist approach to discourse and ideology developed by Ernesto Laclau at the University of Essex following the publication with Chantal Mouffe of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* in 1985, and further developed by his students, Jason Glynos and David Howarth, in the logics approach to critical explanation (2007, 2008, *passim.*; c.f. Glynos *et al.* 2021). In so doing, I will not be the first Essex alumni to have applied post-Marxist theory to the intersection of religion and politics. Indeed, Joanildo Burity has applied it to similar effect in the case of Brazilian Pentecostalism (Burity 2016, Burity 2020) and Yannis Stavrakakis to the case of the Orthodox Church in Greece (Stavrakakis 2004). David Howarth, in particular, has suggested that William Connolly's critique of the "evangelical-capitalist resonance machine" might be effectively complemented by a post-Marxist analysis of ideology and discourse much as I am attempting here (Connolly 2008; Howarth 2011).

As we can see, therefore, despite criticisms with regards to the so-called normative and methodological deficit in post-Marxist analysis (c.f. Critchley and Marchart 2004, Glynos and Howarth 2007), it has been applied to a variety of empirical cases which are not noticeably devoid of normative critique (e.g. Dahlberg and Phelan 2011; Howarth *et. al.* 2000; Howarth and Torfing 2005). Indeed, the logics approach was first developed as a framework by which to operationalize

the insights of post-Marxism for the purposes of critical and empirical research, but in a way that precisely addresses the specific flaws identified in the review of literature above: that is, the positivist tendency to essentialise causal mechanisms and the post-positivist tendency to accept the self-interpretations of the subject (Glynos and Howarth 2007). Indeed, the preceding literature illustrates the way in which one tendency can lead to the other; for example, when the self-interpretations of the subject are taken as the basis for the independent variable in quantitative analysis, which in certain iterations is what the thesis of religious divide has done by uncritically accepting evangelicals' own historical narrative and definition of their faith.

The logics approach to critical explanation enables us to redress this tendency by supplementing the contextualized self-interpretations of the subject with an underlying framework of social, political, and fantasmatic logics; but it avoids the other by using this framework to trace discontinuities in the discursive archive or corpora (Glynos and Howarth 2007: 14, *passim*). In this way, it is able to construct a detailed picture of the problematized phenomena in question in order to formulate an initial or "proto-" explanation from which further research and critique can be retroductively directed (*Ibid.*: 208). It does this by continuing to draw from a range of analytical techniques commensurate (or rendered commensurable) with the theoretical assumptions of post-Marxism, but which cannot be determined in advance due to the problem-driven and retroductive nature of its approach (*Ibid.*). For example, the distinct character and design of my own analysis was a direct response to the combination of logics within the initial problematization of contemporary evangelical discourse undertaken in paper one. The unique emphases and interrelation between the social, political, and fantasmatic logics that I identified therein were factors in determining the further selection of analytical techniques taken from Laclau and Mouffe, Lacan, and Foucault, but also others such as Antonio Gramsci and Raymond Williams, up to the point at which they were commensurable. As the investigation progressed, I was particularly taken by analogies I found in the otherwise diverging methods of Lacanian clinical practice, Foucauldian

problematization, and the deconstructive elements of Laclau and Mouffe. This was highlighted for me by the following passage in Lacan:

> What we teach the subject to recognize as his unconscious is his history— in other words, we help him to complete the current historicization of the facts that have already determined a certain number of historical "turning points" in his existence. (Lacan 1953: 217; c.f. Foucault 1971, 1984; Glynos and Howarth 2007)

Much in the same way that the clinical analyst attends to the blockages and slips of the analysand's speech, I proceeded to trace the diachronic and synchronic discontinuities in evangelical discourse from the early twentieth century until the present, as a means of discerning the dislocations it had faced in the manner of Laclau and Mouffe. This involved reading the historiography of the movement—documented in great detail by writers such as Marsden (1980), Carpenter (1999), Williams (2010), Sutton (2017a) and others beside[1]—but "against the grain", so to speak, in the manner of Michel Foucault (e.g. 1971, 1984). I was able to capitalize on the analogy between the concept of dislocation in Laclau and the traumatic Real in Lacan to bring the full inheritance of both to bear on the relations between the social, political, and fantasmatic logics of evangelical discourse prior to and following Trump. Not all the findings that were produced by these endeavours have made it into the following papers, but they provide the basis for further retroductive investigation and analysis to be conducted in the future.[2]

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[1] The collection of Carter and Porter was particularly useful in this regard and is also felicitously titled *Turning Points in the History of American Evangelicalism* (2017).

[2] I discuss this in more detail in the concluding chapter of the thesis but imagine that it will likely involve tracing these discontinuities further beyond the formation of the religious right and into the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Structure of the thesis

The argument proceeds therefore as follows. In paper one I conduct the initial problematization of contemporary evangelical discourse from which the rest of the thesis will follow. Here I identify three distinct ways in which the post-Trump crisis of evangelicalism has been conceived as a problem within acceptable discursive parameters and then proceed to identify the overlapping and conflicting configuration of logics within each. This leads me to a preliminary conclusion that constitutes the retroductive basis on which the more historical and psychoanalytic discussions of paper two and three will build: namely, that the prospect of voting for a political candidate widely perceived as racist and misogynist, even by those in their own community, proved less dislocatory to the subject identity and sedimented practices of white evangelicals than voting for one who was pro-choice.

In my response to this conclusion, I have followed the methodological cues implicit in the notion that there is a social, political, and fantasmatic dimension to analysis, but specifically in the way that this was articulated in the intervention made on the field by Slavoj Žižek's (initially) sympathetic critique of Laclau and Mouffe. Published as part of Laclau's *New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time* (1990), Žižek developed these thoughts in greater detail in his text, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989), where he suggests that effective political critique should contain at least two complementary dimensions: a discursive-hegemonic and a psychoanalytic-fantasmatic (*Ibid.*: 140; c.f. Glynos and Howarth 2007). In paper two, therefore, I have engaged primarily in the discourse-hegemonic component of this task, revisiting the formation of the religious right in the 1970s and engaging with the way in which this has been conceived in the literature as the result of an essential religious-secular divide. Following a preliminary review and critique of this literature, I locate the source of its essentialism at least partly in the application of Gramsci made by cultural sociologist James Davison Hunter (1992). I compare this with the way in which Gramsci had been re-interpreted by Laclau and Mouffe at approximately the same time and for similar purposes to

boot, then attempt to demonstrate the value of this approach by applying it to a key moment in the formation of the religious right: the articulation of a conservative position on abortion by Jerry Falwell and the Moral Majority. I argue that the way in which Falwell did so was discontinuous to that of existing evangelical statements and was a product of the need to articulate a chain of equivalence capable of uniting conservative Protestants with pro-life Catholics in order to remove President Carter from office. His reasons for doing so, I claim, were not primarily due to Carter's position on abortion or other socially conservative issues, such as gay rights, the ERA, or school prayer, but was instead overdetermined by the position of the Carter administration on the *de facto* segregation of religious schools which was still occurring in the South. This for the most part has continued to resist public official disclosure (see Glynos and Howarth 2007: 148) and so therefore has had an effect on the subjectivity of evangelicals not dissimilar to that of the traumatic Real in Lacanian theory or the return of the repressed in Freud, manifested primarily in the prioritization of abortion over all other policy issues, even to the detriment of evangelicalism as a viable subject of religious and political discourse.

While the focus in paper two, therefore, is on the more apparently discursive nature of the political logics, I nevertheless arrive at a conclusion that is thoroughly psychoanalytic in its implications, which I have the occasion to examine in more detail in paper three. This is undoubtedly the most personal and reflective of the three papers and arises from a suspicion I have had in reading critical research, as well as writing my own, that it can too easily result in the opposite to that which it intends: namely, a reinforcing of the fantasmatic logics by which the subject in question is gripped. In the specific context of the religious right in the US, I refer to the way in which recent ideological critiques of white evangelicals (e.g. Butler 2021, du Mez 2021, Gorski and Perry 2022) have been neutralized and reintegrated into their discourse in a way that reinforces its existing logics. This is particularly evident in positions they have taken to academic ideas relating to critical race theory, deconstruction, and postcolonialism (see e.g. English 2021, Joyce 2022, Mesa 2021, Olsen 2022). And yet, as others have observed, despite the title of Laclau

and Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, surprisingly little of substance has been written on the matter of strategy or ethics in the field of post-Marxist analysis or from a critical discursive perspective in general (on strategy, e.g. Jacobs 2022, Martin 2022; on ethics, e.g. Roderick 2018, van Dijk 2008). The paper therefore aims to contribute to those works in the critical literature that already articulate a normative ethos from the perspective of Lacanian psychoanalysis (e.g. Badiou 2001; Glynos and Howarth 2007; Lacan 2008; Zupančič 2000), but will do so by engaging in a close critical reading of Lacan's more practical statements on the direction of treatment. My subsequent reading of primary and secondary texts in the clinical literature will lead me to perceive the aim of analysis as procedural as much as interpretative, and thus leads to a series of critical reflections on what that might mean in the context of critical research.

I will end this introduction by saying that I by no means delude myself into thinking that this could be either the definitive word on the matter or an entirely objective truth able to explain every factor in the political subjectivity of evangelical Christianity. Indeed, the very way in which the logics approach conceives of its findings as "articulation" precludes any such pretensions, following on from the radical democratic ethos of its normative assumptions and the post-foundational pluralism of its ontology. The "proof of the pudding", say Glynos and Howarth, is ultimately in the "production of persuasive narratives that better explain the problematized phenomena", the validity of which can be judged only by a tribunal of relevant scholars and practitioners (Glynos and Howarth 2007: 191, 39).

The aim of the following three papers, therefore, is to present a persuasive narrative that better explains the crisis of faith articulated within the political discourse of evangelicalism after Trump. The judgement as to whether this aim has been successful, I leave to my community of readers.

Paper 1 – The problem of Trump in evangelical discourse:
The case of the Wheaton College crisis summit

Introduction

From the moment Trump announced his intention to run as president of the United States, he constituted something of a problem for evangelical Christians of the religious right. Evangelicals in North America are (predominantly white) protestant Christians that hold to a conservative theology and morality system conventionally defined in terms of the "traditional" family. They have been a key constituent of US politics since the Carter-Ford election of 1976, and, more significantly, a key component of the Republican coalition since the Carter-Reagan election of 1980 (Martin 1996; Sutton 2013, 2017; Williams 2010). And while Trump is not the first Republican candidate for whom evangelicals have threatened to withhold their vote, the reason his candidacy constituted such a problem particularly is the extent to which both his behaviour and rhetorical style were so dramatically at odds with the traditional morality championed by practicing evangelicals. Conventional policy positions of the religious right, such as promises to appoint conservative judges and defend religious liberty, sat uneasily with the course language and bigotry of his public statements, not to mention multiple allegations (indeed, personal boasts) of sexual misconduct and misogyny. This apparent disconnect put evangelical leaders in a compromising position and threatened to reveal the inherent cynicism of the evangelical-Republican alliance, reactivating in the process ideological fissures that had hitherto remained relatively dormant. Some evangelical leaders, for example, such as Franklin Graham and Robert Jeffress, championed Trump as a kind of "King Cyrus" figure—a flawed but pragmatic choice for achieving "God's purpose"—while others, such as Russell Moore, were early adopters of a "Never Trump" position and warned of the potential for long-term damage to reputation and mission such a compromise might entail (Fea 2020). It was less clear where those in between would

eventually fall and some commentators began to talk again about a potential "crack-up" of the evangelical-Republican alliance (Djupe and Claasen 2018), while prominent leaders spoke of a crisis within the evangelical community itself (e.g. Ditmer 2018, Labberton 2018).

Tropes of crisis, crack-up and fissure have been deployed repeatedly in this conversation and it is not difficult to see why (e.g. Ditmer 2018, Djupe and Claasen 2018, Kidd 2019, Labberton 2018, Noll *et al.* 2019). The inability to articulate the problem of Trump's candidacy in a way that made sense to everyone in the community revealed a deep-seated heterogeneity within evangelical discourse that threatened to destabilise the consensus that had sustained the religious right since the 1970s and -80s. We now know that white evangelicals would eventually poll overwhelmingly in favour of Trump (Bailey 2016) and that the expected realignment did not take place, despite the tropes of crack-up and crisis that prevailed at the time. Peter Bloom has argued persuasively that a "profound paradox" is at work in such articulations of political crisis: "Seemingly demanding radical change it [i.e. crisis] is often met with calls for renewing dominant values and systems of power" (Bloom 2016: 158). And while such tropes can play an important role in critical theory as a "catalyst for driving radical social change", Bloom also warns that, "such optimistic readings of crisis fail to acknowledge its role in paradoxically strengthening dominant ideologies" and emphasizes the need "to pay more attention to how the social articulation of crisis can ironically reflect desires for ideological renewal" (*Ibid.*: p172).

The aim of the following paper is to contribute to this task. To this end, it will take as its case study the proceedings of a two-day conference that took place in the Spring of 2018 at Wheaton College, Illinois, and to which over fifty prominent evangelical leaders and intellectuals were invited to discuss the future of the movement in light of the recent election polls. Conceived quite explicitly as a crisis summit of sorts in response to Trump, it makes for a particularly opportune case study insomuch as it constitutes a discretely bound spatial and temporal context from which to analyse the way in which this crisis was articulated as a problem within evangelical

discourse by some of its leading figureheads. To the extent that these participants perform a function within the wider evangelical community that is both representative and constitutive, they can be seen as analogous to the organic intellectual in Gramscian theories of hegemony and an analysis of their statements can help ascertain the reasons that the problem of Trump did or did not result in an organic crisis. To achieve this aim, the paper will use a method of problematization derived from a post-Marxist approach to discourse and hegemony developed by Ernesto Laclau and his students at the university of Essex. It is to the methodological considerations of this approach that we now turn.

The method of problematization

It is some years since Carol Bacchi wrote about the "problematization" turn in political theory, making it clear from the outset that it is impossible to point to one simple definition or application of the term (Bacchi 2015: 1-2). Most visibly, perhaps, it was used by Michel Foucault as a means to combine the genealogical dimension of his later work with the archaeological insight of his earlier, as well as by Bacchi herself in her WPR approach to policy analysis or "what is the problem represented to be" (*Ibid.*: 2). In the logics approach to critical explanation, a method of problematization is adopted by Jason Glynos and David Howarth to address the so-called methodological deficit in post-Marxist discourse analysis and to make more explicit the way that its analytical insights could be directed towards empirical research, while remaining consistent with its post-positivist ontological assumptions (*Ibid.*: 3-4; c.f. Glynos and Howarth 2007, 2008; Glynos *et. al.*: 2021). "Problematization" in this context, says Bacchi, has been used both as a verb to refer to "the different ways an issue has been problematized, or shaped as a 'problem', by key social actors" and as a noun to "describe what social actors produce as problematizations" (Bacchi 2015: 3). Indeed, the framework developed by Glynos and Howarth helps to facilitate such descriptions by conceiving of the social phenomena in question as an open-ended regime of discursively-

constituted practices characterised by a range of discernible logics – social, political, fantasmatic – in order to describe, explain, and ultimately critique social-political discourse. It therefore successfully operationalises the insights of multiple commensurate scholars for the purposes of empirical political analysis. Following Foucault, for example, it conceives material practices as being constituted according to a type of grammatical structure best understood discursively (cf. Foucault 1972); following Jacques Derrida, it contends that such regimes are sustained by a differential system of meaning, the stability of which is achieved only provisionally by the repression and exclusion of alternatives (cf. Derrida 1967); following Laclau and Mouffe, it discerns in this process a logic of equivalence and difference analogous to the operation of hegemony described by Gramsci (cf. Laclau and Mouffe 1985); and from Lacan and his followers, it derives the idea that the force and fixity of these hegemonic regimes will frequently demonstrate a logic analogous to the psychoanalytic concept of fantasy, insomuch as the contingent and open-ended character of hegemonic worldviews are oftentimes sutured and concealed by an utopian narrative of completion, or else a cataclysmic narrative of defeat (cf. Glynos and Howarth 2007: 145-152; Stavrakakis 1999, 2007; Žižek 2012, 2017). Thus, in the distinctive terminology of the logics approach, we can state that a social logic is that which captures the range of structural patterns by which a specific regime of routinised practices can be characterised; political logics pertain to the articulatory practice of association and exclusion by which these regimes are legitimised or contested; and fantasmatic logics capture something of the unconscious grip or force by which the subjects thereof are frequently compelled.

Applied to the case of white evangelicals in the United States, for example, a researcher might potentially characterise its most widely dispersed and sedimented practices as an assemblage of identifiable social logics – commercial, communicative, pedagogic, and so on – which are the contingent product of its unique historical development: that is, it's theological schism and eventual split from the mainstream denominations of North American Protestantism in the early twentieth century, its eventual organization into a network of para-church agencies and

institutions, and its later realignment with the Republican party as part of the religious right in the 1970s (Martin 1996; Sutton 2017; Williams 2010). From the perspective of a logics approach, there is nothing essential or foundational to any of these practices that would mark them as being inherently "evangelical" from the perspective of a logics approach (indeed we might find similar logics in other quite disparate walks of life, such as political activism or commercial publishing), other than their shared difference to something external that is perceived as "non-evangelical". We see too in this example the importance of a "constitutive outside" in establishing both the political logics and the fantasmatic – some entity that poses a threat to the coherence and stability of their collective identity and thus provides all elements with an equivalential sense of being "evangelical". In the case of historical evangelicalism, for example, this function has been performed at various times by liberal theology, mainline denominations, the Catholic church, and the US federal government (Fisher 2016; Kruse 2016; Sutton 2017).[3]

The effectiveness of problematization as a method of analysis is in the way that it provides a means to trace these logics both historically and structurally, diachronically and synchronically, in a manner that does not depend on the existence of an essential subject. It therefore enables the researcher to attend to the radical contingency by which the subject in question has been historically constituted by identifying the breaks and discontinuities in its discourse *viz a viz* the "problems" it perceives itself to be facing from a constituent other. This is especially valuable for critical analysis, as it provides a means to contest the ideological narratives and logics on which

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[3] For example, although neither discourse analyst or poststructuralist, the historian Linford Fisher has traced a genealogy of the term "evangelical" as a religious concept and concluded that it can (indeed, should) be characterized as much by discontinuity as it is continuity, with his work suggesting that the continuously shifting definitions of what it has meant to be an evangelical in the United States is somewhat less important than what it has meant *not* to be one:

> To be "evangelical" meant different things to different people across time and space, and its meanings and usages changed over time. Nineteenth-century "evangelical" concerns were different from twentieth-century concerns, which were both different from those of the eighteenth century. Our understanding of the use of the word "evangelical" must, at minimum, accurately reflect these changes over time and varying contexts. We need to recognize that "evangelical" was almost always a polemical, contested, and constructed term and idea rather than something objectively existing in a timeless past. (Fisher 2016: 187)

hegemonic alliances have been formed. With regards evangelical discourse, for example, the method of problematization provides a means by which to contest those narratives conceived in terms of an essential subject which downplay the level of historical contingency and exclusionary practices from which it has been formed, thereby placing in question the inevitability of its political alliance with the Republican party.

And yet the method of problematization would also help to resist seeing such discontinuous semantic shifts in merely ideational terms alone, given that these shifts have facilitated the development of a widely dispersed discursive formation, characterised by a shared system of values and the reproduction of routinised social practices within concrete institutions and networks. As these practices become sedimented across time and space, they will become increasingly resistant to contestation and transformation in any way incongruous to their existing logics, regardless of their initially heterogenous and contingent nature. That is, of course, unless they are subjected to a dislocatory event of such undecidability that it is impossible for it to be articulated within the existing discursive formation according to a consistent logic of equivalence and difference. In moments of dislocation such as these, elements that were previously considered equivalent and consistent can appear once again as heterogeneous and contingent, providing an opportunity to politically rearticulate the discursive chain according to an alternative logic of equivalence and difference.

Enter Donald Trump —the radical heterogeneity of whom momentarily made it difficult for evangelicals to credibly articulate their support of the Republican Party within acceptable discursive parameters. In short, as we have seen, voting Trump no longer "made sense" to many evangelicals and hence threatened to reactivate the radical contingency of long-sedimented chains of equivalence and difference, association and exclusion, on which the stability of evangelical subjectivity had depended, thus placing at risk the successful reproduction of routinised practices by which evangelical identity had previously been embodied. By tracing the way in which Trump

has been subsequently made to "make sense" as a problem within evangelical discourse therefore, the following case study can provide some indication of the logics at play in neutralising the threat that was posed by this dislocatory moment and therefore indicate something of the grip that these logics continue to have on evangelicalism as political subject. It is to this case that we now turn.

Case study

According to Glynos and Howarth, the selection and investigation of relevant case study material is a vital component to their logic of critical explanation, because the appropriate case can provide a means to articulate both theoretical and empirical elements in a way that affords neither one an essential or reified status. Glynos and Howarth draw on the work of Bent Flyvbjerg and others (Flyvbjerg 2001, 2006; Foucault 1975; Norval 1996) to delineate a typology of cases that are consistent with their approach, the most relevant of which for our purposes is the "paradigmatic" form: "These cases often function as exemplars or metaphors for a whole class of cases, or as emblematic of an entire kind of society." (Glynos and Howarth 2007: 203) Such cases are useful when constructing generalizations regarding logics and practices from singular phenomena (204). And while there are no general rules for identifying paradigmatic cases (given, they say, that "the paradigms themselves partly constitute the rules"), it can be argued that the Wheaton gathering demonstrates this quality in a number of important ways.

The choice of Wheaton College as the location for the conference is not incidental in this regard. Wheaton holds a distinct status within the evangelical imagination —one shaped both by the college's own institutional history and by the broader historical trajectory of the evangelical movement itself. Evangelicalism in the United States has largely developed outside formal denominational structures, instead thriving through para-church organizations, educational institutions, commercial publishing, and broadcasting networks (Carpenter 1999; Sutton 2017). Each of these sectors were well represented among the conference delegates. These included some

of the most well-respected and influential evangelical leaders, whose role within the wider community is both representative and constitutive, facilitated by the breadth of dispersal afforded the discursive practices associated with these sectors, and which also facilitated the production of a large corpus of statements made by those in attendance.

Moreover, it was for the express purpose of discussing the problem caused by Trump that the meeting at Wheaton had been initially convened (Beaty 2018). It therefore provides a valuable opportunity by which to research the ways such leaders have articulated this problem within a definitively bounded period of time. As such, there is a beginning and end to these proceedings that makes for a singularly discrete case, while also "embody[ing] in an exemplary way a wider field of phenomena" (Glynos and Howarth 2007: 203). And it makes for a particularly effective case for these purposes insomuch as the problem of Trump was conceived from very early on in explicitly discursive terms, meaning that the problem he caused for evangelicals was increasingly perceived as one to do with the meaning and identity of evangelicalism itself. This is demonstrated across many of the early commentaries and opinion pieces which ultimately gave rise to the summit (see Noll *et al.* 2019; Labberton 2018), and subsequently in the earliest correspondence sent out to participants (Beaty, *op cit.*); it is also a facet of preliminary reports by religious correspondents, as well as the speeches and contributions of the participants themselves, not to mention numerous accounts and reflective pieces that have been published by them since (e.g. c.f. Bailey 2016, Labberton 2018, Noll *et al.* 2019).

Of course, there is always a certain amount of risk involved in the analysis of a subject-mediated corpus such as this, where the phenomenon involved has been reported or recorded by the community themselves (*Ibid.*: 202, *passim.*). Indeed, in building my corpus I have relied to a relatively large degree on the reports, speeches, social media posts and publications of those who were involved in the summit proceedings. This is consistent with the methods of data gathering and case study construction conducive to poststructuralist discourse theory and the logics

approach (Glynos and Howarth 2007; Howarth 2005; Jørgensen and Phillips 2002), but it is important to be alert too to any tendencies toward uncritical acceptance of the subject's own interpretation of the logics involved or the temptation to lapse into a particularism of thick description. Indeed, the logics approach has been conceived precisely as a means to avoid both the positivist pretensions of causal mechanisms and the post-positivist particularism of contextualised self-interpretations (Glynos and Howarth 2007: 188). Key to achieving this is the concept of articulation, where neither empirical nor theoretical elements are assigned a privileged status, and which problematizes the line between the "discovery" of social processes and the "justification" of their critical analyses (202). By linking together theoretical concepts and empirical phenomena in this way, the critical analyst can produce "a singular explanation of a problematized phenomenon" (181), with a well-chosen case study contributing to this "by providing the contextually specific knowledge within which to link our more general logics together in a particular instance." (204) The "proof of the pudding", says Glynos and Howarth, is in the "production of persuasive narratives that better explain the problematized phenomena" (191), the validity of which is ultimately entrusted to a "tribunal" of critical scholars or relevant practitioners (39). It is to such a tribunal that I entrust the following account of the problematized phenomena at hand.

Findings

Three distinct patterns of problematization can be discerned in the case study material, characterized by a range of overlapping but ultimately incompatible configurations of social, political, and fantasmatic logics, and which indicate three distinct ways by which the problem of Trump has been articulated within the acceptable parameters of evangelical discourse. For heuristic purposes, I have opted to refer to these three problematizations as dominant, residual, and emergent, drawing on (but only up to its point of commensurability) Raymond Williams' influential

reading of Gramsci (Williams 1977). As discourses of problematization, I found that these were best described in the first instance in terms of their political logics of equivalence and difference; in the next section, however, I will further link them to relevant aspects of the social and fantasmatic in order to construct an explanation of the problematized phenomena at hand.

Dominant. The dominant is so-called not because it is necessarily the most successful problematization of the three but because it attempts to articulate a chain of equivalence across the widest range of subject positions and is mostly consistent with the position embodied by mainstream institutions such as Wheaton College, Fuller Seminary, *Christianity Today* magazine, and the Lausanne missional movement. Key spokespeople in this group include evangelical scholars such as Mark Labberton and Mark Noll, as well as mega-church pastor and best-selling author, Tim Keller.

We can see iterations of this position in the very earliest statements of the organizing committee itself and in its initial communications to invitees. In stating that the summit's goal was "to disentangle the word 'evangelical' from its current attachment with far-right partisan politics and refocus it on Christ and the Church", organizer Doug Birdsall implies that there is an essential core to evangelicalism from which politics can be disentangled (Beaty 2018). This is reinforced by his claim further on that the purpose of the summit is "neither political nor centered on public policy", and also later by keynote speakers such as Mark Labberton and Tim Keller: "the focus of [whose] talk", says Beaty, "along with others, was not Trump's policies and how they affect people but the way politics have divided the church" (2018). This message is further reiterated by the contributions of those who focused on a need to return to an objectively true definition of what it means to be evangelical based on "core questions of faith": "evangelicals need to return their focus to the term's true definition: a person who believes in the authority of the Bible, salvation through Jesus' work on the cross, personal conversion and the need for evangelism" (Bailey 2018).

For this dominant position, then, Trump is not necessarily a problem for evangelicals because he is fundamentally *inconsistent* with their core values, but rather because he draws attention away from what is important—conceived *a la* David Bebbington primarily in terms of theology and mission (Bebbington 1988; Noll *et al.* 2019)—towards the secondary and more divisive issues of politics and partisanship:

> When you google evangelicals, you get Trump… When people say what does it mean to be an evangelical, people don't say evangelism or the Gospel. There's a grotesque caricature of what it means to be an evangelical. (Smith 2018)

In terms of a political logic of equivalence and difference therefore, the dominant problematization proposes a united evangelical identity defined by the same theological essence shared across all subject positions; and yet, as mentioned above, any such equivalence can be achieved only through the acceptance of a shared antagonism. This clearly cannot be Trump himself, or it would alienate too many who voted for him in the election, so it has to be the notion of political partisanship in general. This effectively results in depoliticizing the crisis precipitated by Trump, but also draws a negative equivalence of sorts between those who support Trump politically and those who would oppose him, as if the two were morally equivalent: "With a few exceptions, the older, white cohort stressed civility and unity. What the movement needed, they said, was a gentler evangelicalism that reached across partisan aisles for the common good." (Beaty 2018)

Residual. The dominant problematization is contested from two opposing directions, which I will categorize here as residual and emergent, and which align with the widening generational divide observed by Beaty in her report in *The New Yorker* (*Ibid.*). Statements in the residual category tend to issue from leaders of organizations that are more often than not funded and supported by

evangelicals that are also supportive of Trump, many of whom either did not attend the summit at all or elected to leave early, criticizing its "Trump-bashing" tone (Browder 2018). A number of the statements in this group attempt to pre-emptively delegitimize any criticism of Trump at all by marking a clear line of antagonism between those who were invited and those who were not: "Any definition of 'thought leaders' and any definition of evangelicalism that excludes the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association and Franklin Graham is a pale imitation —anaemic and incomplete." (Jordahl 2018) In terms of political logics, the problem precipitated by Trump in evangelical discourse is not due to the actions of Trump himself, which are viewed favourably overall, but the response to these actions by those in the dominant and emergent groups. The residual problematization is partly so-called because it articulates a subject position constituted by a logic of equivalence and difference that predates that of the dominant, but continues to define the identity of many evangelicals actively practicing today (c.f. Williams 1977: 122-3). It thus draws on residual antagonisms in order to delegitimize the dominant and emergent positions by articulating them into a negative chain of equivalence, while referring favourably to high-profile evangelical leaders that have been close to Trump, such as Franklin Graham, Jerry Falwell Jr., and Robert Jeffress. Indeed, Jeffress' own statements are exemplary of this group: "The real agenda of the new coalition, Jeffress argues [referring to the summit], is to liberalize evangelical theology on issues like immigration, climate change, and the role of government." (*Ibid.*) Here Jeffress articulates the spectre of liberal theology as a familiar evangelical antagonist, while subtly distorting any distinction to liberalism as a political ideology. It is partly due to the radically contingent logics of equivalence and difference articulated by this position that, without contradiction, Jeffress is able to acknowledge Trump's multiple moral failings (from a traditional evangelical perspective) while proclaiming him "without doubt, the most faith-friendly president we've ever had" (*Ibid.*), which he and others in this group have made abundantly clear is primarily due to his "vows to advance pro-life measures… and appoint conservative pro-life justices and judges." (Smith 2018)

Emergent. The second direction from which the dominant problematization is contested is the group of statements that I have referred to as emergent. This is partly because it represents the fastest growing constituency within evangelicalism both globally and domestically, emerging from multiple minority groups in the global north and evangelical congregations from the global south (Hutchinson and Wolffe 2012; Jenkins 2002; Kay 2013). Significantly, this is the group which conceives of Trump most explicitly as a problem in contemporary evangelical discourse, insomuch as he cannot be made to make sense in a way that they see as consistent with their faith. It is this problematization, therefore, that most vehemently places in question the political association between evangelical Christians and the Republican Party on which the idea of a "religious right" is based. The sense of dislocation created by the discursive incomprehensibility of white evangelical support for Trump is captured by one attendee in almost Lacanian terms: "There are no words for what he [Trump] said. And people [i.e. other evangelicals] would support that? [...] It opened a wound. And there are still people mourning and weeping." (Trillia Newbell, cited in Green 2016) The statements in this group do not stress theological unity but rather "repentance":

> there could be no real unity without white evangelicals explicitly confronting the ways in which they had participated in the degradation of persons of color and women. They contended that white evangelical churches and organizations had for decades supported a political agenda that deemed unborn lives more sacred than black lives. (Beaty 2018)

A recurring figure within this group of statements is A.R. Bernard, who previously sat on Trump's faith advisory group but resigned following the President's comments regarding a white supremacist march in Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017:

> [Bernard] believes many white evangelicals have been too focused on what they view as issues of sin and personal morality, such as abortion and same-sex marriage, without

looking at issues that most concern black evangelicals, such as economic inequality and police shootings. (Ditmer 2018)

Statements such as these highlight the material outcomes experienced by evangelicals of colour as a result of white evangelical support for Trump. As such, says Bernard, evangelical leaders that support Trump "continue to squander their moral authority in an attempt to sanitize the president… This presidency has exposed the spiritual, moral and racial condition of this nation… The racial divides goes deep in this country, and they've invaded the church." (Bailey 2018) Charlie Dates, a young black preacher from Chicago's South Side, puts it bluntly: "American evangelicalism has not been able to separate itself from the perks of white supremacy." (Beaty 2018)

As if to prove his point, it was following Beaty's live tweet of this statement that a social media blackout was imposed on the proceedings, and it almost certainly contributed to the decision by organizers not to publish an official statement following their conclusion (*Ibid.*). Beaty's own account provides a sense of the dislocation that Dates comment might have invoked in other delegates:

One longtime leader of an evangelical umbrella group said that he had already received calls from donors for merely attending the meeting, and that asking them to repent for racism would be seen as too *political.* (*Ibid.,* my emphasis)

This statement also indicates something of the social logics at stake, especially in its reference to the potential effect on donations. Indeed, it is at such intersections of the social and political that we might intuit something of the fantasmatic too, from which we can then proceed to posit an explanation in response to the problem posed at the beginning of the article. Namely: why did the

problem of Trump in evangelical discourse not lead to greater disarticulation between white evangelicals and the Republican Party as widely predicted?

Discussion

In these three problematizations, therefore, we see three conflicting ways of "making sense" of the world and the sedimented social practices constituted therein, and in which it feels natural for the respective subject positions to engage —the causes they choose to support, the churches they choose to attend, the politicians they choose to elect, and so on. For example, where those in the residual category might consider voting for Trump a non-negotiable due to the pro-life position of his party—or, perhaps more accurately, to the pro-choice stance of his opponents—those in the emergent category similarly consider a vote for Trump entirely inconceivable due to his statements regarding women and minorities. Neither position "makes sense" to the other, so to speak. And while ordinarily the inconsistent and undecidable character of this shared discursive inheritance would not pose too great a problem to the day-to-day reproduction of their respective social practices, when placed into a position of close proximity and discursive exchange each subject position is forced to withstand irrefutable evidence of their own radical contingency. How each group responds to such moments can therefore provide valuable insight into which practices each position ultimately prioritizes and the strategies of problematization that they are willing to deploy to protect them.

Take the moment of dislocation mentioned above. We know from the report in *The New Yorker* that the request for social media silence was made by the organizing committee after Beaty tweeted a number of statements, including that by Dates to the effect that evangelicalism had long profited from "the perks of white supremacy":

Organizers initially said that some conversations over the two days would be on the record, and others would not be. But, after I tweeted quotes from several on-the-record sessions on the first day, I was asked to stop. (Beaty 2018)

Beaty reports that fewer people were in attendance on the second day of the summit and that the discussions taking place were no longer on-the-record. Nor was the joint statement that was originally proposed ever forthcoming. The reason seems clear: "Several younger speakers urged that the statement had to include a tone of repentance for complicity in racism and sexism. Others in the room balked. One longtime leader of an evangelical umbrella group said that he had already received calls from donors for merely attending the meeting, *and that asking them to repent for racism would be seen as too political.*" (*Op. cit.*, my emphasis.)

The suggestion contained therein that acknowledging complicity in racial injustice would be seen as "too political" clearly aligns with the dominant problematization's political logic, which posits a fundamental antagonism between an essential evangelical core defined theologically *viz a viz* non-essential issues of "political division" and partisanship. But it is the mention of donors in this context that is particularly revealing, hinting at the social logics at stake in this dislocatory moment and the political logics at play in protecting them. When read in the context of the entire article, the image depicted is one of a movement caught uncomfortably between its past and its future: "Something of a generational gap seemed to emerge among the attendees over the question of whether the Church should seek to rise above contentious political questions or address them head on." (*Ibid.*) This puts those in the dominant group in something of a bind because, as Bailey notes:

[t]heir institutions tend to be fuelled by an older generation of primarily white donors, many of whom are conservative and friendly to Trump's policies. However, the future of their institutions is worrisome because many younger evangelicals and the growing number

of evangelicals of color are distraught by the perception that the movement has become so tied to Trump. (Bailey 2018)

Christianity Today is a case in point. The foremost evangelical news journal in North America, when *CT* published an editorial in 2019 criticising Trump on the occasion of his first impeachment, it lost approximately two thousand domestic subscriptions; conversely, it gained approximately five thousand new ones, "with the latter coming from a younger, more diverse and more global audience" (Bailey 2019). The balance in this case between residual and emergent tipped in favour of the journal, but other organizations are not so able to capitalize on an international subscription base: "The cost for some of these of speaking out would be losing millions of dollars in donors," says one representative, "The organizations could crumble." (*Ibid.*)

To be clear, this is not to suggest a return by proxy to some form of economic reductionism but rather to suggest that the financial pressures faced by mainstream evangelicalism should be understood as one important but contingent social logic among others, and by which their social practices can be characterised. Rather than to see these commercial logics as determinant, we must view their prioritization by the subject as an indication of the fantasmatic logics by which mainstream evangelical discourse appears to be gripped, for it is in the fantasmatic dimension that the logics approach primarily draws its explanatory force (Glynos and Howarth 2007: 145). The dilemma faced by the evangelical movement is that the immediate reproduction of its routinised social practices rests in no small part upon those aligned with the residual problematization, while its long-term future depends on those more aligned to the emergent. Hence the political logic it deploys is an attempt to articulate a chain of equivalence and difference that is wide enough to encompass both subject positions at once: "With a few exceptions, the older, white cohort stressed civility and unity. What the movement needed, they said, was a gentler evangelicalism that reached across partisan aisles for the common good." (Beaty, *op. cit.*) True unity, however, would require

that the chains of equivalence and difference articulate the demands of each subject position equally, and those in the emergent group had repeatedly stated that there would be no possibility of unity without first acknowledging the inconsistencies inherent to evangelicalism's past:

> Others, especially the leaders of color, stressed repentance; there could be no real unity without white evangelicals explicitly confronting the ways in which they had participated in the degradation of persons of color and women. (*Ibid.*)

Indeed, it was this demand for an attitude of repentance that led to the decision to quietly abandon the joint statement for which the summit had initially been convened. That this decision articulated the logic of the dominant problematization—in short, that it would be seen by donors as being too "political"—belies the equivalence articulated by the dominant framing of theology versus politics, insomuch as it provides further indication as to which social practices and positions it would be dislocatory for older, white evangelicals to acknowledge as contingent and which social practices and positions it would not.

It is from such imbalances and inconsistencies that we can begin to intuit something of the fantasmatic logic by which mainstream evangelical discourse continues to be gripped, and which can be discerned elsewhere in the corpus in similar statements associated with the dominant position. Tim Keller, for example, despite articulating as clearly as anyone the idea that evangelical unity should be above political division and partisanship, still readily admits that most evangelical pastors would vote for Trump when it came down to it (Green 2016); Russell Moore—current editor-in-chief of *Chritianity Today* and no friend to Trump—says very much the same thing: "Most pastors were fundamentally skeptical of Trump, even if they ended up voting for him" (*ibid.*). And while Robert Jeffress is primarily articulating the logic of the residual in his claims that Trump's "public failings are immoral and offensive, but still better than the alternative

in 2016" (Jordahl 2018), he is equally articulating that which is present but left unstated in the dominant problematization too.

Glynos and Howarth have previously suggested that "empirical evidence indicating the presence of a fantasmatic object can often be identified by asking *whether or not it resists public official disclosure*" (2007: 148). We might conclude from the actions of the organizing committee that what resists public disclosure by the dominant problematization is all too easily disclosed by the residual, highlighting once again the imbalance and inconsistency of the equivalential chain that the dominant attempts to draw between all three subject positions. Indeed, the fantasmatic presence of an association between the dominant and residual based on the prioritization of a pro-life position ultimately leaves the political logics underpinning the Trump movement insufficiently reconfigured, yet there is little recognition of what this will cost evangelicals of colour both psychologically and materially:

> I spend most of my time in ministry talking and teaching about racial reconciliation [says Jemar Tisby]… The vast majority of white evangelicals with whom I interact are on board and want to see a more racially diversified and unified church. However, when that same constituency overwhelmingly supports Donald Trump, I feel like they haven't understood any of my concerns as a racial minority and an African American. (Green 2016)

When even those who seek racial recognition and acknowledge Trump's unsuitability for office nevertheless admit to voting for him anyway, it is difficult not to see some truth in the emergent claim that "white evangelical churches and organizations ha[ve] for decades supported a political agenda that deemed unborn lives more sacred than living black lives" (Beaty 2018). At the very least we must infer from this that it is somehow less dislocatory to the subjective identity of white evangelicals to vote for a candidate widely perceived as racist and misogynist—even by those within their own movement—than it is to vote for a candidate who is pro-choice on abortion.

Conclusion

The summit that took place at Wheaton College in 2018 was understood by its organizing committee and invitees to have been "prompted by the challenges of distortions to evangelicalism that have permeated both the media and culture since the 2016 election", and which was clearly seen by many as placing the future of the movement at risk (Beaty 2018). It's implicit aim therefore was to secure a future for the movement by "disentangl[ing] the word 'evangelical' from its current attachment with far-right partisan politics and refocus[ing] it on Christ and the Church" (*Ibid.*). And yet, despite paying lip service to the concerns of younger evangelicals represented by the emergent problematization, the summit proceedings ultimately acted to re-suture the dislocation provoked by these demands in the subjectivity of older evangelicals and the recognition of radical contingency it would have forced them to confront. In so doing, it effectively opted for the immediate financial security of the contemporary evangelical movement at the expense of its long-term survival and signally failed to achieve that which it consciously intended.

In the context of Lacanian practice, when a subject is perceived to do the opposite of that which it intends to the detriment of its own interests and survival, it is perceived as a form of pathological or self-defeating behaviour, and points to the fantasmatic grip of a repressed trauma around which its identity has become fixated (see paper three; c.f. Bailly 2013, Fink 1997a, Lacan 2006). The logics approach to critical explanation enables us to perceive something similar in the discourse of a political subject. If the social logics are that which capture the "what" of discursive phenomena, then the political logics are that which enables them to describe the "how"; but it is the fantasmatic dimension from which a critical analyst can intuit something of the "why" (c.f. Glynos and Howarth 2007: 145). It is from this therefore that the logics approach derives its explanatory capacity to generalise from singular phenomena, such as the summit that took place at Wheaton. And while the fantasmatic dimension of political discourse consistently resists "public

official disclosure", we can nevertheless trace something of its effects in the inconsistencies and discontinuities discernible in the subject's problematization of the dislocatory threats it faces. It is this which provides the retroductive base on which future critical research can proceed.

We are now at the point where we can risk an explanation of the problematized phenomena contained in the case above. White evangelicals have consistently prioritized voting against pro-choice candidates over those perceived as racist, suggesting that the thought of voting for a pro-choice candidate poses the greater dislocatory threat to their identity. We can infer from this that within evangelical discourse, the pro-life stance on abortion serves as a mechanism both to conceal and to suppress the contradictions and inconsistencies in their collective identity that might be a source of dislocation were they to be openly recognized. I would argue that it further suggests that the inconsistencies it attempts to suture are related to an earlier dislocatory, and more traumatic, moment in the formation of evangelical subjectivity that continues to resist public official disclosure and is profoundly related to the experience of racial identity in the United States of America. And while it is beyond the scope of the paper to go beyond this point at present, it serves as an indication of the direction in which subsequent analysis and critique should proceed, as well as the urgency with which it should do so. Indeed, it also suggests the need for this project to contain an explicitly psychoanalytic dimension, for the fundamental lesson of psychoanalysis is that repressed trauma will inevitably return in the form of pathological symptoms, and that to address only these symptoms will result in the trauma's displacement rather than its successful dissolution. Trump ultimately delivered the means to achieve the religious right's long-term goal to reverse *Roe v. Wade* (1973) and yet it is still not enough to satiate the disapprobation of white evangelicals. Thus, their attention has subsequently turned elsewhere—critical race theory, the LGBTQ+ community, even the World Health Organization—providing multiple demands by which a far-right politician might leverage their support once again. Trump may or may not be the next Republican candidate, or even the next American president, but the problem he signifies in

the discourse of evangelicalism will not disappear when his political career is over. The crisis continues.

Paper 2 – Revisiting the religious divide after Trump:
On the hegemonic formation of the religious right

Introduction

The idea that there is a religious-secular divide in US politics has long shaped scholarship on the religious right (Hunter 1992, Hunter and Wolfe 2006, Margolis 2019, O'Brien and Abdelhadi 2020, Wuthnow 1988b). It is a thesis initially proposed in response to the perceived re-salience of conservative religion in the electoral politics of the 1970s, which would ultimately lead to the defeat of incumbent president Jimmy Carter by the ex-Hollywood actor and Californian governor, Ronald Reagan. At its core, the thesis of religious structuration or divide posits that voters from diverse faith traditions—across denominations, creeds, and religious communities—increasingly coalesced around a shared set of conservative social and cultural concerns, driven by what they perceived as a growing liberalization (or, from their perspective, decline) of moral values. This realignment transcended historical divisions, bridging not only the longstanding tensions between northern evangelicals and southern Baptists but also those between conservative Protestants and Roman Catholics. This is the premise, for example, behind the influential "culture war" thesis of sociologist, James Davison Hunter, which contends that alignment on key social issues such as abortion, prayer in school, and gay rights was an inevitable by-product of their conservative theology and respective belief systems, however heterogeneous these might otherwise have been, and that the affinity such groups found in this alignment ultimately outweighed any historical enmity that previously existed between the faith groups, denominations, and creeds in question (Hunter 1992).

A prominent stream in the study of politics and religion has thus tended to depict the political trajectory of the United States since the 1970s as one of increasing polarization or

"restructuration" along religious-secular lines, with those associated with traditional beliefs more likely to vote for the Republican Party and those indicating more secular or progressive values as likelier to vote for the Democrats (e.g., c.f. Abramowitz and Webster 2016; Green 2010; Hunter 1992; Layman 1997, 2001; Margolis 2019, 2020: 95, 110; Wuthnow 1988b, 1996). And it was this restructuring along religious-secular lines over the course of the 1970s and -80s which resulted in the formation of a large conservative voting bloc in US electoral politics commonly referred to as the "religious right", a key moment of which was the founding of a political organization known as the "Moral Majority" by the Southern Baptist minister and television personality, Jerry Falwell, alongside Republican party activist and Catholic, Paul Weyrich.

The problem with this thesis is that it fails to account for a number of contradictions and inconsistencies in the historical record, making it difficult to fully explain more recent political developments, such as the sheer intensity of support shown by white evangelical Christians for Donald Trump in 2016. Despite his personal rhetoric and behaviour standing in stark contrast to the professed values by which they are generally identified, prominent evangelical figures such as Jerry Falwell Jr., Robert Jeffress, and Franklin Graham championed Trump as a kind of "King Cyrus" figure, arguing that his personal shortcomings were secondary to his ability to deliver on key policy goals, the most important of which had always been to overturn the Supreme Court ruling on *Roe v Wade* in 1973 (Fea 2020). And yet the centrality of the pro-life position to white evangelical identity and politics, we would argue, is precisely one of the historical inconsistencies alluded to above that should be treated as a problem to be explained rather than the explanation itself. Specifically, it requires us to assume that the evangelical opposition to abortion was stronger than its historical antagonism towards Catholicism, while overlooking other inconsistencies and contingencies in the historical record, such as the peripheral nature of pro-life activism in evangelical discourse both before and in the immediate aftermath of the Supreme Court ruling on *Roe v. Wade*. As William Martin observes:

> The strongest opposition to abortion prior to and immediately following the Court's decision came from Roman Catholics… Evangelical and fundamentalist Protestants, many of whom now consider abortion a litmus test of extraordinary importance, had little to say about it one way or the other. It appears, for example, that Jerry Falwell did not preach a sermon on abortion until 1978. (Martin 1996: 193)

The thesis of the religious divide thus relies on an underlying essentialism that is not only difficult to substantiate, but which has also exerted a long-lasting effect on social science scholarship on politics and religion. It is the essentialism of this thesis that the following paper would seek to contest, not least because it takes as *explanans* or explanatory—the alignment of white evangelicals with Catholics over the issue of abortion—that which should rightly be seen as *explanandum* or problem. The cumulative effect of such essentialism, it shall be argued, is that it delegitimizes religious support for the Democratic Party while theologically legitimising white evangelical support for Republicans, thus reinforcing the very logic that it should be seeking to explain and leaving the impression that the situation of religious structuration is politically and theoretically intractable. It begins by first revisiting the literature of religious structuration in order to critically examine the essentialist assumptions that underpin its explanatory framework: specifically, in the way that Hunter applied Gramsci's concept of hegemony in his influential thesis of "culture war" (Hunter 1992). It will contrast this to the post-Marxist reading of Gramsci that was being developed during the same period by the political theorist Ernesto Laclau at the University of Essex, the effectiveness of which it proceeds to demonstrate by revisiting the function of pro-life discourse in the historical formation of the religious right and the founding of the Moral Majority. Ultimately the paper will argue that, rather than conceive these developments as the intervention of an essential religious identity in the field of politics, we should perceive it instead as an hegemonic intervention on the part of political operatives in the field of religion.

Literature: rethinking the religious divide

The concept of a religious divide in US politics owes much to the thesis of religious structuration in the work of sociologist, Robert Wuthnow, and has been, according to O'brien and Abdelhadi, "the most influential theoretical framework for understanding the relationship between religion and political attitudes in American life" for the past thirty years "in both sociology and political science" (2020: 2-3). Sometimes referred to informally as the "God gap", the thesis is summarised by Michele Margolis as follows: "Conventional wisdom suggests that religion has produced this God gap, with religious voters sorting into the Republican Party and secular and less religious voters joining the Democratic Party's ranks." (2019) The most well-known iteration is perhaps James Davison Hunter's notion of "culture war", which argued that the primary axis of political and social conflict in the United States was no longer along economic or party lines, but rather between two cultural worldviews —an "orthodox", generally rooted in traditional religious beliefs, and a "progressive" camp, rooted in a form of secular liberalism (Hunter 1992; c.f. Hunter and Wolfe 2006). And while Hunter's work on the culture wars was published some years after Wuthnow's on religious restructuring, it was in many ways a continuation of his earlier work on evangelicalism from the previous decade (Hunter 1983, 1987).

There had been a demand for work in the social sciences and humanities that could provide a scholarly explanation for the renewed place of religion in US politics following the election of "born-again" Jimmy Carter and the subsequent formation of the religious right in support of the Republican Party. Sociologists such as Hunter and Wuthnow responded to this demand by drawing on earlier historians of religion, such as George Marsden and Ernest Sandeen (Marsden 1980, Sandeen 1970), who specialised in American fundamentalism of the early twentieth century. This led to an understanding of modern evangelicalism that was essentialist in its assumptions and linear in its relation to the past. This first wave of historiography has been problematized in recent years by a younger wave of religious historians, such as Matthew Avery Sutton and Linford Fisher,

who criticize the linearity of the "rise-fall-rebirth narrative [that] has dominated the literature on twentieth-century American religion [and] has become so ingrained in textbooks that most religion scholars and historians simply assume it is indisputable." (Sutton 2017b: 240; c.f. Fisher 2016) This newer wave of historiography presents an image of a movement that is far less unified in practice and more contested in definition. In such work, "evangelical" and "evangelicalism" are terms that are defined by what they are not as much as by what they are and, prior to Falwell's intervention in the late 1970s, were primarily used as a form of identity by conservative Christians in the northern states of America —even then, usually as an identifier only of para-church affiliation, such as the member churches and denominations of the *National Association of Evangelicals* (Fisher 2016, Sutton 2017a). This is corroborated by reports of the time, which depict a level of disunity between conservative protestants of the Northern and Southern United States that can appear surprising in retrospect, and indicates just how contested evangelical discourse still was in the mid-1970s:

> 'We are *not* evangelicals,' says Foy Valentine, the liberal activist who has long headed the SBC [Southern Baptist Convention]'s Christian Life Commission. 'That's a Yankee word. They want to claim us because we are big and successful and growing every year. But we have our own traditions, our own hymns and more students in our seminaries than they have in all of theirs put together. We don't share their politics or their fussy fundamentalism, and we don't want to get involved in their theological witch-hunts.' (Woodward 1976)

In 1976, Southern Baptists such as Falwell were largely lining up to support the Democrat's candidate, Jimmy Carter, and the statement above had been provoked by Northern evangelicals casting doubt on his "born again" status in sermons (*Ibid.*). Conservative protestants in the

Southern United States such as those affiliated to the SBC, were far more likely to cling to regional or denominational identities than the para-church identities of these Northern protestants.

Contemporaneous reports such as these illustrate the enduring divide between North and South and undermine the assumption that religious conservatism automatically translated into a cohesive political movement; but it also complicates the thesis that evangelicals and Southern Baptists would naturally align politically with conservatives of other faith groups or none:

> 'The fact is that Southern Baptists have been culturally isolated and are theologically unsophisticated,' charges the usually placid Albert C. Outler, a distinguished theologian at Southern Methodist University. 'They have had no experience in dealing as equals with evangelicals who are different from themselves. They also have no basis in their theology for working politically with Catholics, Jews and secular moralists, whom they view as unregenerated worldlings heading for damnation unless converted.' (*Ibid.*)

This provides some much-needed historical context to the claim made by Martin above that most conservative protestants had little to say about *Roe v. Wade* at the time of the ruling and it is worth quoting the original reference at greater length:

> The strongest opposition to abortion prior to and immediately following the Court's decision came from Roman Catholics… Evangelical and fundamentalist Protestants, many of whom now consider abortion a litmus test of extraordinary importance, had little to say about it one way or the other. It appears, for example, that Jerry Falwell did not preach a sermon on abortion until 1978… [Theologian Harold Brown] has suggested that lingering anti-Catholic Bias may have played a role in their late espousal of the pro-life position. "[…] The fact that Catholics were out in front caused many Protestants to keep a low profile." (Martin 1996: 193)

So while the formation of the Moral Majority in 1979 by Jerry Falwell was undoubtedly a key moment in uniting conservative protestants of the north and south, ultimately aligning them politically with pro-life Catholics around the issue of abortion, to view this development as the inevitable outcome of an essential divide between religion and secularism, or traditionals and progressives, is to obscure the discontinuous and contingent nature of these developments in relation to evangelical history and discourse both globally and within the United States of America. This can have significant unintended consequences on scholarly research by reifying the very divide that it purports to explain, theologically legitimizing the pro-life position of the religious right as being more fully consistent with biblical orthodoxy than it is, while delegitimizing religious support for the Democratic Party, most of which tends to come primarily from voters connected to the historical black churches (cf. Newton 2020, Tranby and Hartmann 2008). In other words, there is a distinct racial dimension to religious-political alignment in the United States that is not unrelated to the circumstances involved in the formation of the religious right, but which is unduly obfuscated if we see it as the result of an essential divide based on moral and theological commitments. What is required therefore is a less essentialist method of analysis that can more adequately account for the discontinuous and contingent logics at play.

One such approach to political identity was being developed at the time by a scholar who was grappling with problems not dissimilar to those faced by Hunter and using similar theoretical resources to boot. It is instructive therefore to examine where his use of these resources differed. It is to this task that we turn next.

Method: post-Marxist approaches to ideology and discourse

The scholar in question was the Essex-based political theorist, Ernesto Laclau, who, like Hunter, would spend much of his career attempting to make sense of political phenomena that were resistant to class-based explanations. In Hunter's words, "This is not a struggle over scarce economic resources, nor is the exploitation of the working classes even an issue"; as such, "traditional Marxist categories… simply do not apply to this situation – or to anything else anymore!" (1992: 64) And while Laclau may not have been as ready as Hunter to discard Marxist categories, he did share a similar impulse to avoid a reductionist account of their role in the rise of new social and political movements (Laclau 1990; Laclau and Mouffe 1985, *Passim*). Both Hunter and Laclau were to find a solution in the Marxian concept of hegemony, particularly drawing on the way in which it had been conceptualized in the prison notebooks of Antonio Gramsci (1971).

Used previously to account for examples of combined and uneven development that defied classical Marxism, Gramsci had appropriated the concept of hegemony from Lenin to explain the lack of a working-class revolution in Italy and the subsequent rise of fascism (Landy 1994; Martin 2022, *passim*). In contrast to the Marx's concept of ideology, Gramscian hegemony conceives of cultural forms – such as religion, the media, education – as a crucial way in which the ruling class actively draws on the symbolic resources of the people to win consent to its moral and political leadership. But while this can lead to an analysis which is less reductionist than traditional Marxism, Gramsci remained throughout his life a committed member of the communist party and, as such, the hegemony he conceived was still a process defined ultimately in terms of class identity (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). It is precisely this aspect of Gramsci's theory that Laclau critiques. Drawing on poststructuralist and post-foundationalist resources, Laclau deconstructs the rigid class binaries inherent in Gramsci's framework, arguing that political identities—rather than being reducible to class position—are instead the contingent product of discursive practices. This is where Laclau's theoretical project fundamentally diverges from Hunter's. Whereas Laclau

problematizes essentialist identity categories, Hunter inadvertently reproduces the very kind of residual essentialism that Laclau critiques.

This tendency is particularly evident in the way that he applied his concept of the organic intellectual to the context of the culture war thesis. For Gramsci, the importance of cultural forms mean that every member of society had the capacity to be an intellectual even if they did not perform the function of one (Gramsci 1971; Landy 1994). Of those who do, however, there are two main categories: the traditional and the organic. Traditional intellectuals are those—such as academics and teachers, priests and philosophers—who see their work as timeless and autonomous in relation to the political struggle between classes, while organic intellectuals are those who emerge within the material conditions of society and are closely aligned to the interests of the forces involved. As such, the latter type has an almost intuitive understanding of the material conditions of struggle, giving them a capacity to provide the people with the intellectual and moral leadership necessary to hegemony. One way in which they do this is to draw on the cultural forms of the people themselves to make sense of the antagonisms they are facing, win consent, and legitimize their own intellectual and moral leadership.

Hunter's mistake is to map these categories uncritically to the groups he had already designated as orthodox and progressive:

> In Gramscian terms, it is the leadership of the orthodox alliance who play the part of traditional intellectuals and the leadership of the progressivist alliance who play the part of the organic intellectuals, both struggling to establish their own interpretations of the American past and to articulate an agenda for the American future. (1992: 63)

It is an application that is in multiple ways contradictory to Gramsci's own use of the terms, and perhaps not fully consistent with Hunter's own analysis either. Where neither the orthodox group

or progressive would be an example of an organic intellectual in Gramsci's application, both should rightly be seen as such in Hunter's, and the arbitrary application of traditional and organic based on the presumption of orthodoxy (or lack thereof) succeeds only in unnecessarily essentialising the dichotomy, therefore making it insufficiently capable of dealing with the inherent mutability of cultural change. In short, Hunter reproduces the residual essentialism of Gramsci not through a similar impulse towards economic reductionism but through his own equally reductive impulse towards a normative secularism (c.f. Miller 2016).

But where Hunter views the resulting antagonism as a confrontation between two essential identities, Laclau's discourse theory problematises the very notion of fixed political identities. Rejecting the idea that antagonisms arise from essential group identities, he considers such identities to emerge from the antagonisms themselves and regards even class identity as the product of discursive practice (c.f. Laclau and Mouffe 1985, Laclau and Zac 1994). Applied to the case of the religious right, therefore, his perspective enables us to conceive of the religious divide in American politics not as the result of an essential religious identity, but, conversely, the religious identity of American evangelicals as itself articulated according to a contingent logic of equivalence and difference in response to a perceived antagonism (c.f. Laclau and Mouffe 1985, Fisher 2016). "Evangelicalism" in this framework functions as a kind of "floating signifier" within a discursive formation, which means that its meaning is neither stable nor self-evident but rather constructed through discourse. This perspective is better able to account for the apparent inconsistencies in evangelical history—such as the early evangelical support for Carter and indifference to *Roe v. Wade*—perceiving them not as contradictory to an essential *religious* identity but as a result of the general indeterminacy and essential contestability inherent to all *political* identity.

It was precisely this indeterminacy that enabled Carter to construct a temporary chain of equivalence between the socially conservative values of his fellow Southern Baptists and the more progressive policies of the Democratic left by articulating a political discourse centred on an

amorphous notion of "family". However, it was his failure to sufficiently "decontest" this discourse (Freeden 1996) in a way that "made sense" to all subject positions in the chain that allowed the religious right to appropriate the discourse of family for their own purposes and for Jerry Falwell to articulate evangelical identity according to a new logic of equivalence and difference that is still hegemonic today. How he did so is the subject of the next two sections.

Findings: pro-life evangelicalism before Jerry Falwell

The cracks in the coalition that Jimmy Carter had built during his presidential campaign became increasingly apparent over the course of his first term in office and he was only able to defer its inevitable implosion past the midterm elections by promising all parties involved an official White House Conference on the Family (WHCF) (Flippen 2011, Martin 1996). This would eventually take place in 1980, but by that point Weyrich had already met with Falwell to propose the creation of a new political organization; one that could unite conservative protestants from both the North and South with pro-life Catholics around a set of socially conservative issues (*Ibid.*). This was in 1979 and the organization would become the "Moral Majority".

The dates are not insignificant. The Supreme Court announced their ruling on *Roe v. Wade* in 1973, when Falwell was still preaching a position of political quietism in response to the involvement of Baptist ministers in the civil rights movement (Falwell 1965). Not that there wasn't a current of pro-life evangelical discourse at the time, but this was mostly articulated on the periphery by a younger generation influenced by a combination of new left campus politics, Catholic social teaching, and older evangelicals such as Francis Schaeffer and Carl Henry (Gasaway 2014, Swartz 2012).

Falwell liked to credit his intervention to the influence of Schaeffer also, probably as a means of depicting it as part of this minority tradition (Williams 2010: 155-6, 2016: 237; c.f. Flippen

2011: 192; Martin 1996: 194-7), but this is unlikely. Indeed, a brief comparison of the ways in which Schaeffer and Falwell articulate their opposition to abortion and other issues should be enough to indicate why. The work of Daniel K. Williams is helpful in emphasising the discontinuity between the pro-life discourse of Falwell and that which came before:

> Many of the Catholics in the movement had long been social justice-oriented Democrats, and in the early 1970s, many of their liberal Protestant allies…attempted to link the movement with the political causes of the left. For many Catholic and liberal Protestant pro-lifers, saving unborn babies was a human rights issue, just as providing help to unwed mothers was. Pro-life evangelicals saw the issue differently. Most of them were political conservatives who linked abortion with other issues of sexual morality. For them, pro-life activism was part of a broader campaign to restore Christian morality in America. (2016: 236)

This is certainly true of Falwell, whose earliest key statements accord to Williams' observations:

> If we expect God to honor and bless our nation, we must take a stand against abortion… We as a nation must take a Bible position on morality and begin to teach it everywhere, beginning in our homes, in our schoolrooms, in our communities, and in our states. (Falwell 1980: 179-180)

Articulated in such statements as these is a chain of equivalence designed to resonate with the political subjectivity of Southern Baptists, by combining elements of Christian nationalism and states' rights with a biblical morality which is defined in contradistinction to the socially progressive policies of the times. However – and this is important – these statements were not articulated until after the institution of the Moral Majority, which followed Falwell's meeting with Weyrich in 1979, and dates to some years after the Supreme Court ruling on *Roe v. Wade* (Martin 1996: 200; Williams

2010: 172). It is far less evident in the pro-life evangelical statements prior to this, the articulations of which were far more compatible with the Catholic social teaching of the activists that the evangelical left marched alongside (Martin 1996: 193; c.f. Gasaway 2014, Swartz 2012). Indeed, this is a large reason why pro-life discourse was so peripheral to evangelicalism prior to Falwell's intervention, and why pro-life evangelicals had to repeatedly make the case that abortion was not an issue for Catholics alone (*Ibid.*; c.f. Schaeffer 2008: 266, 283; Williams 2016).

Take Schaeffer, for example (Schaeffer and Koop 1980, *passim*). While he and his co-author (Reagan's future surgeon general, C. Everett Koop) take great pains to argue why abortion should not be seen as a "Roman Catholic Issue" (or, indeed, as a religious issue at all) (*Ibid.*: 26), their position on the matter is nevertheless far more consistent with Catholic social teaching than that articulated by Falwell. Their argument against abortion is primarily an ethical one derived from an understanding of universal human rights (*Ibid.*: 68, 113, *passim*; c.f. Lewis 2018), which they repeatedly situate within a wider social context of race relations and economic justice that would undoubtedly have sat uncomfortably with Falwell and the religious right (1980*:* 14-15, 27, 42, 44, 48, *passim*). At times, Schaeffer and Koop appear to advocate for a system of social welfare that is more closely aligned ideologically to Catholic social teaching than it is to later evangelical discourse (*Ibid.*: 15, 63-5; c.f. Bretherton 2022). They also critically compare abortion to child corporal punishment (i.e. "smacking") in ways incongruous to later evangelical teachings on child discipline (*Ibid.*: 15; c.f. Dobson 1970). At one point, they establish their case by critiquing what they call "sociological law" in a way that is not dissimilar to certain Foucauldian and post-colonial critiques of the academic social sciences today (*Ibid.* 6-7, 57). Such themes also fit uncomfortably with the disciplinarian tones of later evangelical discourse and its dog-whistle references to law and order or states' rights, not to mention its more recent antagonistic stance in relation to critical race theory and decolonization (Joyce 2022).

In short, where Schaeffer and Koop articulate a position on abortion in terms of a universal (if God-given) human dignity—drawing a moral chain of equivalence throughout with social injustices created by economics and racism, eugenics and euthanasia—Falwell articulates his position instead along lines more recently characterised as "Christian nationalism" (see Gorski 2017; Gorski and Perry 2022; Whitehead and Perry 2022), drawing a chain of equivalence between pro-choice positions on abortion and other socially progressive policies that he viewed as morally reprehensible from a conservative ideological standpoint: "It was important to speak of ERA, the *Roe* decision, and protection for homosexuals as examples of laws contrary to the traditional American family," Falwell is quoted as saying, "It helped marshal the troops." (Flippen 2011: 192)

Schaeffer, on the other hand, evidently felt deeply uncomfortable with such strategies or alliances (Schaeffer 2008: 78, 297, 315) and is reported as saying about Falwell: "That man is really disgusting… You can be cobelligerents, but you don't have to be allies." (*Ibid.*) Indeed, this fits well with what we know about Schaeffer. Although theologically conservative, he possessed an intellectual curiosity and interest in art and culture that marked him as an oddity within mainstream evangelicalism of the sixties and seventies (c.f. Noll 1994). He gave up his early pastorate to set up a spiritual retreat in the Swiss Alps where he and his wife would entertain passing travellers and graduate students. Virtually canonized now by white evangelicals for his role in the religious right, he was best known in the early seventies for the influence he exerted on the emerging evangelical left (Swartz 2012: 98; c.f. Gasaway 2014). At this point, pro-life activism as a whole was associated far more with a Catholic left than the religious right and the only evangelicals willing to work alongside them were younger, college-educated Christians, most of whom had been influenced by the campus politics of the new left (Gasaway 2014; Schaeffer 2008; Swartz 2012; Williams 2016). Indeed, it was Schaeffer's youngest son, Frankie, who had initially convinced the writer to take up the pro-life cause (Schaeffer 2008: 266). The discontinuous nature of this development is rarely acknowledged in conventional historiography, and, if mentioned at all, is generally perceived as an

aberration or inconsistency, whereas it is political evangelicalism's turn to the right that should be seen as a historically contingent in the context of these initial developments.

This is all the more evident when we compare the political statements of the evangelical left with later statements from the religious right. Where the latter replicate Falwell's discursive strategy of articulating abortion within a negative chain of equivalence that includes feminist activism, gay rights, pornography and anything else antithetical to the "family values" of the new right, the more left-leaning Chicago Declaration of Evangelical Social Concern drew from the liberation theology of the global south and articulated its pro-life position within a positive chain of equivalence that included civil rights activism, progressive race relations, and women's equality:

> We deplore the historic involvement of the church in America with racism and the conspicuous responsibility of the evangelical community for perpetuating the personal attitudes and institutional structures that have divided the body of Christ along color lines. Further, we have failed to condemn the exploitation of racism at home and abroad by our economic system. (Cited in Swartz 2012: 267)

Where Falwell's manifesto articulates cold war anti-communism in starkly nationalist terms, the Chicago Declaration is concerned with trade justice and international development, and is overtly critical of the military spending and materialism of the United States:

> We must attack the materialism of our culture and the maldistribution of the nation's wealth and services. We recognize that as a nation we play a crucial role in the imbalance and injustice of international trade and development. Before God and a billion hungry neighbors, we must rethink our values regarding our present standard of living and promote a more just acquisition and distribution of the world's resources. (*Ibid.*: 267-8)

When progressive evangelicals on the left did articulate a pro-life position towards abortion, it was done so in a way that they referred to as "consistently pro-life", and is part of an equivalential chain that includes opposition to capital punishment and the advocacy of progressive social policies such as free healthcare and income support (c.f. Gasaway 2014; Swartz 2012; Wallis 2009). Moreover, the Chicago Declaration was published in 1973 —the very year that the Supreme Court ruled on *Roe v. Wade* and six years before Falwell and Weyrich would establish the Moral Majority (Martin 196: 200; Williams 2010: 174-5). At a time when those on the evangelical left were already allying with social activists from both the Catholic and historic black churches of America, Falwell was still articulating a position of political quietism in response to the civil rights movement of the sixties and seventies, while also investing time and money into providing private education to white families aggrieved by the increasing integration of schools in the South (Sutton 2013; Swartz 2012). It therefore defies credibility to suggest that the same man would be so quick to reject this position for a cause associated at best with evangelical progressives, at worst with "Roman Catholicism", simply because he was convicted by the ethico-political arguments of Francis Schaeffer, "a somewhat marginal but interesting intellectual figure" (Schaeffer 2008: 265) who was beloved of gap-year students and hippies (c.f. Martin 1996: 159; Schaeffer 2008: 207-8; Williams 2010: 137-9). Indeed, when Falwell was finally to align himself with pro-life Catholic groups in the late 1970s as part of the religious right, it would ultimately lose him friends and colleagues in the wider Southern Baptist community (*Ibid.*: 173-4), impacting both his financial interests and professional networks, just as it had Schaeffer before him (Schaeffer 2008: 290-1). To understand therefore why Falwell might risk a dislocation of such magnitude to his subjectivity and social practices, it is helpful to begin by understanding the social dislocations that he was beginning to face already. It is to a problematization of these events that we turn next.

Discussion: pro-life evangelicalism after Jerry Falwell

The dates of Falwell's intervention are particularly important insomuch as they provide an indication of the potential dislocations that were motivating his antagonism *viz a viz Roe v. Wade* and the administration of Jimmy Carter more generally. Given that Falwell did not articulate either of these things as a significant problem until well into Carter's first term (Flippen 2011, Martin 1996)—and given also that Carter's position on abortion had remained relatively consistent throughout this time—we must assume that neither *Roe v. Wade* nor the Carter administration were considered to be a problem by Falwell until some years after the Supreme Court's ruling. Put slightly differently, Falwell's open support for Carter in the first campaign had not threatened to dislocate or disrupt the routinised social practices on which his identity as a subject had been hitherto embedded. As such, Falwell's political activity or lack thereof throughout the sixties and seventies takes on a renewed significance and provides an indication as to which practices were eventually to be threatened by dislocation.

As mentioned above, Falwell had previously preached a position of political quietism or non-intervention, arguing vehemently that preachers and ministers should not engage in political activism in the face of racial injustice: "Preachers are not called to be politicians but to be soul winners" (Falwell 1965: 59; Martin 1996: 69-70; Sutton 2013: 11-3). That this was at the height of the civil rights era would suggest from a perspective of problematization that Falwell had little to gain but much to lose from the progressive expansion of civil rights legislation and rulings. On the contrary, Falwell had done very well financially and professionally by supplying private education to white families in light of the increasing desegregation of public schools in the southern states (Martin 1996; Sutton 2013; Williams 2010). The financial viability of Falwell's interests in private education depended to a very large degree on the tax-exempt status afforded to religious institutions in the US on the proviso that they remained distanced from partisan politics. For the entirety of the sixties, therefore, these institutions were in a very real sense subsidised by the US

federal government and, while the Civil Rights Act of 1964 made segregated schools and universities illegal in theory, it was not until the IRS targeted Liberty University in 1970 that Falwell's routinised practices were threatened by dislocation in practice (*Ibid.*). However, given that this threat was first directed by a Republican administration—and given too that abortion at this time had not yet become the partisan issue that it later would (Flippen 2011: 18-9)—it would have been far less of a problem for Falwell to have supported Jimmy Carter as the Democratic candidate in 1976 than it would have been for him to have supported the Republican candidate, Gerald Ford.

Indeed, it was largely in their support for Carter that "born-again Christians" first came to widespread recognition as a political constituency in their own right (c.f. Flippen 2011, Woodward 1976). In this respect Carter can be seen as the beneficiary of a political realignment that was already underway across the southern United States. Conservative protestants in the South were generally the working class that had long been part of the Democratic Party's New Deal Coalition (Sutton 2017a; Williams 2010). But while the so-called southern strategy of Richard Nixon's Republicans had begun the process of realignment (see Phillips 2014), evangelical leaders such as Falwell saw the Democratic Carter as being "one of their own" (Flippen 2011; Martin 1996). Indeed, Carter was the first presidential candidate to explicitly self-identify as a "born again" and "bible-believing" Christian himself and therefore very little of what Carter would say over the course of his campaign presented much of a problem to a Southern Baptist such as Falwell. This applied equally to Carter's position on *Roe v. Wade*, which was still perceived very much by conservative Protestants as a "Catholic" issue, and something on which the federal government should not involve itself (Flippen 2011: 19; Martin 1996: 196; Williams 2016, *passim*). Carter was therefore able to temporarily align the support of southern Protestants with the emerging loyalties of a progressive new left.

But while Carter's status as a born-again Christian had been sufficient to construct a tenuous equivalence between otherwise heterogeneous positions in the campaign, it never quite

achieved the discursive stability necessary to sustain a long-term coalition, and the contradictions it had attempted to suture would become increasingly apparent as his administration began to translate campaign rhetoric into concrete policy (Flippen 2011; Martin 1996). Faced with increasing pressure from his party's progressive wing to enforce existing civil rights legislation, Carter could no longer be seen to be inactive on the matter of segregated education in the south and so he authorised the IRS to investigate (Sutton 2013). It is in the context of the dislocatory threat caused by this action to his routinised practices as a prominent minister and businessman that we must view Falwell's increasing antagonism towards the Carter administration and his subsequent attendance at the WHCF. Indeed, this reading of events is confirmed by Weyrich himself:

> [W]hat galvanised the Christian community was not abortion, school prayer, or the ERA. I am living witness to that because I was trying to get those people interested in those issues and I utterly failed. What changed their mind was Jimmy Carter's intervention against the Christian schools, trying to deny them tax-exempt status on the basis of so-called de-facto segregation. (Weyrich, cited in Martin 1996: 173)

Weyrich continues to explain, and it is worth quoting at length,

> that while Christians were troubled by abortion, school prayer, and the ERA, they felt able to deal with those on a private basis. They could avoid having abortions, put their children in Christian schools, and run their families the way they wanted to, all without having to be concerned about public policy. But the IRS threat "enraged the Christian community and they looked upon it as interference from the government, and suddenly it dawned on them that they were not going to be able to be left alone to teach their children as they pleased…" (*Ibid.*; c.f. Balmer 2007, 2021)

The White House conference on the family took place in the Summer of 1980, just months prior to the Carter-Reagan election, and it was here that the full extent of the underlying antagonisms in the Democratic coalition would become fully apparent. Indeed, there is a visceral sense of the

dislocation felt by the progressive and socially conservative wings of the Democratic Party when confronted by the other—in discourse-theoretical terms, forcing each to acknowledge their own radical contingency—in the historical accounts of the conference: "It stepped outside of any kind of professional conversation and turned into a personal conversation." (cited in Martin 1996: 182) In terms of the political discourse theory of Laclau, therefore, we might say that Carter's articulation of a chain of equivalence between socially conservative Christians and socially progressive activists had failed to properly decontest the undecidable elements involved enough to stabilise a sense of common identity or cause. The dislocation felt by both sides in confronting the other was a reminder and reactivation of the radical contingency by which the tenuous equivalence between the two had originally been forged on the campaign trail. As such, it provided political operatives connected to the Republican Party with the opportunity to articulate an alternative chain of equivalence capable of aligning conservative evangelicals alienated by Carter's position on private education with pro-life Catholics alienated by his position on *Roe v. Wade*. And yet this task was not quite as easy or as straightforward as it appears to be in retrospect and required a delicate hegemonic operation to be conducted by the organic intellectuals of the emerging religious right.

Paul Weyrich was a Republican operative and devout Catholic who believed opposition to abortion might serve as an effective gateway policy to conservative politics; a nodal point around which he could articulate a cluster of socially conservative political demands with the capacity of aligning conservative Catholics with Protestant evangelicals (Flippen 58-9; Martin 1996: 170-3; c.f. Balmer 2007, 2021). The problem that he faced was that most Catholics were relatively progressive on social issues compared to white evangelicals and would undoubtedly be resistant to the Southern Baptist position regarding integration; equally, many evangelicals at the time were not only socially conservative, but resistant to anything that smacked of the ancient adversary of "Roman" Catholicism (Martin 1996: 193; c.f. Fisher 2016, Sutton 2017a). So, while the sense of dislocation experienced by evangelicals during the WHCF had presented Weyrich with an

opportunity for hegemonic rearticulation, in order for this to fully overcome the intransigence of these sedimented practices and subject positions, it required that they be articulated as part of a stable chain of equivalence constituted by shared opposition to a credible common antagonist. To accomplish this, Weyrich needed someone with the credibility and standing of Jerry Falwell.

Falwell's solution to the problem was to simultaneously present both the issue of *Roe v. Wade* and the IRS investigation of religious education as part of a concerted attack by "secular humanists"—a negative empty signifier that could (and still can) include progressive liberals, socialists and communists, anti-racists, federal agencies, feminists, and gay rights activists—against the forces of "biblical morality" (Falwell 1980, *passim.*; c.f. Laclau 1994, Stavrakakis 1999, on the concept of "empty signifiers"). Conversely, the latter term served the purpose of a positive empty signifier, which was used to evoke a vague tradition of "Judeo-Christianity" (c.f. Loeffler 2021; Greenberg 2019), its articulation combining a logic of equivalence expansive enough to encompass both theologically conservative Protestants and pro-life Catholics, but a logic of difference specific enough to exclude members of either community who were deemed insufficiently "biblical". In Falwell's telling, therefore, the continued strength and survival of the United States of America depended on the extent to which this vague biblical morality had been adhered to historically by its citizens, the primary medium for the transmission of which was the "traditional" family (Falwell 1980) Equally, and conversely, however, the continued existence of a properly "biblical" morality depended on the strength and survival of a hegemonic United States (*Ibid.*). As such, anything that weakened the traditional family also by definition weakened the moral fibre of the nation, thus placing it at risk. Falwell articulates this chain of equivalence very clearly in the text that would serve as the *de facto* manifesto for the Moral Majority—*Listen, America!*—at the centre of which is an important chapter with the title "Family—the Basic Unit":

> There are only three institutions God ordained in the Bible: government, the church, and
> the family… The family is the fundamental building block and the basic unit of our society,

and its continued health is a prerequisite for a healthy and prosperous nation… Families in search of freedom to educate their children according to religious principles originally settled this land… There is a vicious assault upon the American family… The single most important influence on the life of the child is his family [and] the strength and stability of families determine the vitality and moral life of society." (Falwell 1980: 121-3)

In such statements, Falwell successfully articulates the signifier of "family" with those such as "biblical morality", "nation", and "freedom", their equivalential position in the articulatory chain constituted by the threat of the federal government's "secular humanist" agenda. The role of private religious schools in this is explicit, as is the risk to its tax-exempt status:

It is our own government that has attacked the family's role as a primary educator of children. The Internal Revenue Service is now seeking to control private and Christian schools. The HEW [United States Department of Health, Education, and Welfare] has undertaken the redrafting of textbooks to purge traditional moral concepts. Court decisions have all but mandated the replacement of religion with secular humanism. Almost insurmountable obstacles are placed before parents who wish to educate their children in nonpublic schools. (*Ibid.*: 131)

In conclusion, the hegemonic success of the political logic here articulated by Falwell is evident in the way in which it outlived the lifespan of the Moral Majority and continued to influence the discourse of the religious right in the decades that followed. Its influence and position within the religious right ecology would wane over the course of the Reagan administration and its hegemonic position eventually replaced by Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition of America (CCA). And while the tactics and organizational focus of the CCA in the 1990s differed from those of Falwell's movement in the 1980s—Robertson favoured a grassroots strategy at the local level, whereas Falwell had pursued a top-down, national approach (Williams 2010)—the extent

to which the political logic articulated by Falwell continued to permeate the religious and political consciousness of white evangelicals is evident in the ideological grip it still exerts on their political decisions today. Despite deep reservations about Donald Trump's personal character and moral failings, an overwhelming number of white evangelicals supported him anyway— ostensibly due to his commitment to overturning *Roe v. Wade*. To interpret this solely as the outcome of an essential theological divide is to misrepresent the polarized conditions of contemporary U.S. politics as unnecessarily intractable. And, as the preceding argument has sought to demonstrate, it can also obscure the racialised dimension which has underpinned pro-life evangelical discourse following Falwell's intervention. This makes it almost impossible to properly account for the paradoxical tolerance of white evangelicals for Trump's most problematic aspects and can leave the impression that opposition to abortion is more consistent with a conservative theology or hermeneutic than opposition to racialised and economic injustice. As such, the foremost reason that the present article can provide for revisiting the literature of the religious divide after Trump is not simply that it presents a deficient analytical framework for the study of politics and religion, but that it also succeeds in actively reinforcing the very logics that it should be seeking to critically interrogate.

Paper 3 – On the ethics of psychoanalysis in critical discursive research:
The case of the religious right after *Roe v. Wade*

Introduction

The quest to reverse the Supreme Court ruling on *Roe v. Wade* had been the focus of the religious right agenda for more than four decades when it was finally achieved in June 2022. The original decision had protected the right to abortion for United States citizens since 1973 and it was largely in opposition to this that the long-term alignment between white evangelicals and the Republican Party had been forged (c.f. Martin 1996; Williams 2010, 2016). Their decision to throw support behind Donald Trump despite initial widespread doubts (Margolis 2020) ultimately paid dividends, with the three Supreme Court Justices nominated during his first term enough to tip the balance on *Roe*. Evangelicals in the United States tend to be theologically conservative protestants who self-define as "Bible-believing" or "born again" Christians and yet, despite there being little of note in the Christian Bible on the matter of abortion, it has since come to constitute something of a "litmus test" for their political and religious identity (Martin 1996: 193). It has repeatedly led them to reject candidates who have similarly considered themselves born again (Jimmy Carter, for example) in favour of those who most certainly do not (such as Ronald Reagan or Donald Trump), almost as if there were something in the mission to reverse *Roe v. Wade* that was more consistent with the bible than being a biblical Christian, or more important than being born again. In short, it is almost as if there is something in the antagonism to *Roe v. Wade* that is more evangelical than the "evangel". Writers and scholars who have highlighted the historical contingency of this position, or else otherwise drawn attention to the contradictions involved in evangelical support for Trump, tend to be dismissed or branded as "liberal" and therefore anathema to "true" evangelical values (see e.g. Balmer 2007, 2021; Butler 2021; Du Mez 2021). It appears to matter little whether the critique is sympathetic to the movement or not, conducted on grounds of gospel

effectiveness or simply historical accuracy, the result is generally the same: aggressive disavowal and expulsion from the wider evangelical body.

It is easy to see in such instances the relevance of certain psychoanalytic concepts that derive from the work of Jacques Lacan and point to the existence of a "strange body in my interior which is 'in me more than me'" (Žižek 1989:204). Indeed, such concepts have for some time had a place in the critical analysis of ideology and discourse. There is a long tradition of psychanalytic theory in ideological analysis which can be traced back at least as far as the Frankfurt and Althusserian schools (see Žižek 2012; 2017); but it is with the contribution made by Slavoj Žižek and Ernesto Laclau in the 1980s and -90s that Lacan's later work, in which he developed some of his most important ideas around fantasy, the Real and *objet a,* began to take on an increasing centrality to the analysis of discourse and ideology (e.g. Laclau 1990; Laclau and Zac 1994; Žižek 1989, 1990; c.f. Stavrakakis 1999, 2007). Žižek's intervention is a key moment in this development. He argued that the critical analysis of ideological forms necessitated two distinct but complementary dimensions: one of which is discursive and necessitates a discourse-analytical approach, such as genealogy or deconstruction; the other is fantasmatic and is a means by which the analyst can account for the force by which this ideology or discourse has gripped the subject (1989: 140; c.f. Glynos and Howarth 2007). The dimension of fantasy, however, can be more problematic to contend with because, in Lacan, it "is not to be interpreted, only 'traversed'" (Žižek 1989: 141). The role of the analyst in this context is primarily to help facilitate the analytical process rather than to impart interpretative knowledge to the analysand or subject. Indeed, even the most accurate interpretation delivered by an analyst may be counter-productive if conducted without this procedural goal in mind (Bailly 2013: 197), as the fantasmatic is more than capable of feeding upon its own critique and can become reinvigorated in the face of too hasty an interpretation. In short, the defensive response provoked by such interpretations can often reinforce the very logics that they seek to destabilise.

Engaging with psychoanalytic theory and practice in this way can go some way to explaining the reaction of evangelicals to even the most sympathetic interlocutor, the vehemence of which likewise often succeeding only to reinforce the logics that the critique sought to challenge; but it should give us pause when considering the way in which we conduct critical discursive research more generally. If the goal of such research is not only to understand the world but to change it too (Marx and Engels 1998; c.f. Glynos and Howarth 2007, Jessop 2018), then the appropriate use of psychoanalysis to these ends has ramifications of an ethical and strategic kind. And yet, as others have observed, remarkably little has been written about either ethics or strategy from a critical discursive perspective (on ethics, e.g. Roderick 2018, van Dijk 2008; on strategy, e.g. Jacobs 2022, Martin 2022). Lacan's ideas are frequently deployed in critical research for their explanatory value and compatibility with a discursive perspective, but Lacan's own motivations were profoundly ethical (Lacan 1958, 2008). He remained at heart a teacher and a physician, driven by a desire to increase the effectiveness of clinical intervention in both his own practice and that of his students. This is more than a mere point of historical or theoretical scholasticism, but one that gets right to the crux of the critical project, for it implies that the end of such research is ethical rather than epistemological, strategic rather than explanatory or interpretive.

At least that is the argument presented in the following article, the central premise of which is that there is something to be gained by revisiting the clinical aspects of Lacanian practice for ethical and strategic direction in critical research, for it was primarily in this capacity that Lacan formulated ideas most relevant to the aims of the analytic process. To this end, it proceeds as follows: it will begin by highlighting the subtle but discernible differences in the way Lacan's conceptual framework has been discussed in both contexts, before expositing in some detail the implications this has for the process of critical analysis. It will continue by applying some of the more pertinent aspects of clinical treatment to the formation of political subjectivity, using as its case the opposition to *Roe v Wade* by white evangelicals mentioned at the start of this introduction. It will conclude by articulating more explicitly the general principles that emerge from this

discussion, emphasising in particular the ways in which they might complement and strengthen existing scholarship and research strategies. To some extent, the article builds on other critical works that find normative direction in the ethics of Lacanian psychoanalysis (Badiou 2001; Glynos and Howarth 2007; Lacan 2008; Zupančič 2000). However, we will not be starting with the texts that are conventionally favoured by critical researchers in the social sciences and humanities (e.g. Lacan 1953, 1960) but with that in which he provided the clearest outline of his approach to the direction of treatment (Lacan 1958; c.f. Bailly 2013: 181).

On the direction of the treatment and the principles of its power

There has been a noticeable difference, says Bailly, in the way in which Lacan is discussed in the critical literature compared to that of the clinical, and that this difference is partly due to translation (2013: 1-3, *passim*). Lacan's writing can be famously difficult to decipher and frequently draws on concepts that are more familiar to those in the social sciences and humanities than to those in the clinical professions (*Ibid.*). The former, suggests Bailly, are more adept at dealing with the dense exposition of abstract terms, while the latter possess a more intuitive grasp of their clinical relevance. This means that it is mostly in the social sciences and humanities that Lacan's work has had the greatest impact in the English-speaking world, but that it is not without consequence for its application in critical research. Something is lost when Lacanian theory is divorced from its clinical base, which can make it easy to forget that Lacan was first and foremost a medically trained physician that turned to psychoanalysis for its curative potential, and it is in this context that we should read apparently abstract concepts such as *objet a,* and the triadic structure of Imaginary-Symbolic-Real (ISR).

The latter is a case in point. The centerpiece of Lacan's evolving metapsychology, it is rooted in his clinical research and experience of child development, and therefore relates not only to a theory of subject formation but to clinical treatment too. Indeed, the ISR reflects the

thorough interrelation of theory and practice and was therefore a way for Lacan to communicate to his students the means by which they could recognize maladaptive symptoms in their patient's discourse and direct the course of the treatment accordingly. Lacan's most explicitly directive statement on clinical practice suggests that he had come to believe that interpretation was frequently taking place too early in the process (2006: 497, 500) or else not at all (496), reflecting a fundamental mistake in the way that the analyst was ultimately positioning themselves in relation to the analysand. Guided by the ISR, Lacan taught instead that treatment should progress through three distinct moments or stages (logical if not always chronological) that mirror those of subject formation, the first and second of which are the "rectification of the subject's relations with reality" and the "development of the transference", before only then arriving at the third and final stage of "interpretation" (500).

We will later consider the relevance of these three stages to the critical enterprise. First, however, it helps to draw on the secondary literature by clinical writers such as Fink (1997a, 1997b, 2007, *passim*) and Bailly (2013; c.f. Leader 2013) to understand just how closely these three stages relate to the three dimensions of the ISR, as it helps to put Lacan's teachings in context for the purposes of critical research. For example, Fink describes the first stage in the process more specifically as involving the clarification of imaginary and symbolic relations, by which he means the elimination of "interference in symbolic relations generated by the imaginary", or, put slightly differently, "to get imaginary conflicts out of the way so as to confront the analysand with his or her problems with the [symbolic] Other" (Fink 1997a: 33)[4]. This expresses the importance attributed by Lacan to the mirror stage of development in facilitating the passage from an imaginary relation to the self as an objectified other to a properly symbolic relation to the big Other

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[4] Note: I follow the usual Lacanian convention of capitalizing only that which pertains to the symbolic "Other". Anything that pertains to the imaginary or to both or simply to others in general will remain un-capitalized. (c.f. Bailly 2013: 219)

as the subject of discourse, but it is also suggestive of the risk in developing later maladaptive symptoms if this passage is inhibited.

A crucial moment in the development of the child as an autonomous individual, the mirror stage is the point at which the infant begins to perceive itself as a coherent whole rather than a collection of disparate sensations and affects, the recognition of which is quickly and verbally affirmed by an other (Lacan 1949). In the Lacanian scheme, this function is assigned to the mother but could be any primary caregiver, the affirming words of which the infant cannot fully understand but nevertheless will experience a sense of pleasure from the recognition that they convey. The affective charge this supplies is an important part of the process—and will be crucial too in the application of Lacan's ideas to the formation of white evangelicalism as a political subject—for it draws on the narcissistic pleasure that the child feels when first recognizing itself in the mirror, and which is then deployed to coax and encourage them to take their first tentative steps into the symbolic register. The infant will try to divine in the words of the Other the desire that it perceives therein, and which it senses is responsible for the caregiver's frequent absence; absences moreover that create in the infant an inchoate sense of not being enough for them, and which it experiences as an inherent inadequacy or lack (Bailly 2013, *passim*).

This results in the infant's increasing use and familiarity with the symbolic register in an attempt to decipher the meaning behind these absences. Its discourse begins to form around a small number of "master signifiers" which have come to stand in as metaphors for this inherent inadequacy perceived by the child, but also provides them with a sense that it might one day compensate for the very thing that it is missing, when they can permanently capture once and for all the desire (and therefore presence) of the Other. These are those signifiers in the discourse of the child (and later the analysand) that suggest a hope of mastery and completion, but in so doing conceal an implicit admission of their perceived inadequacy and lack (Bailly 2013). For Lacan, the most important of these signifiers is the "Name of the Father", which comes to represent that

which the (m)Other desires more than the infant and therefore the foremost desire of the symbolic Other. Neuroses can occur later in life if the child is unable to accept the fundamental lack which renders it dependent on the Other, fantasising consciously or otherwise that they might overcome this lack if only they can finally possess that which the Other desires (Fink, *op cit.*).

Thus begins Lacan's differentiation of the self into *je* and *moi*—the symbolic subject and the imaginary ego—which was to form the basis of Lacan's "return" to Freud and reinterpretation of the oedipal complex (Macey 1994: xxii). But where the concept of the ego for Freud is a central arbiter of reality, a similar function is more accurately performed in Lacan by the concept of the subject, as it is through adaptation to the symbolic dimension that the child interacts in a wider world of social relationships. The ego in this equation belongs to the imaginary register and it can cause great complication in clinical treatment if the imaginary and symbolic registers are misrecognized in the analysand's discourse, just as it can in critical research —indeed, this is the psychoanalytic basis for Zizek's claim that ideological analysis requires both a discourse-analytical and fantasmatic dimension to be effective (c.f. Fink 1997a: 33, Žižek 1989: 140). Hence it is only by clarifying that which pertains to the relation to an imaginary other from that which pertains to the big Other of the symbolic register that the analyst can confidently proceed to the second stage of treatment. Lacan refers to this as the development of the transference, but both Fink and Bailly describe it in closely related terms as a "dialectization" of master signifiers (Bailly 2013: 101; Fink 1997a: 50, *passim*; c.f. Fink 1997b).

It is a process that is closely associated—theoretically, strategically, ethically—with what Lacan would refer to as the "dialectic of desire" (Lacan 1960; Fink 1997: 50) and is transferential insomuch as it involves a reactivation of the repressed lack contained in the master signifiers: "The point about the master signifiers", says Bailly, "is that they have a repressed counterpart which gives them meaning —the apparent signifieds of the master signifiers are unimportant." (Bailly 2013: 193) However, given that the function of these signifiers is to suppress the feeling of

inadequacy and to hold out hope that it is ultimately surmountable, the reactivation of their originary cause will be experienced by the analysand as traumatic and resisted on behalf of its narcissistic ego. As such, he says, master signifiers can be recognized as those that recur frequently in the analysand's discourse but invariably bring free association to a halt, partly due to the anxiety they produce, but also because their meaning appears self-evident to the analysand already (*Ibid.*: 61). Thus, there is a tautological character to master signifiers that is directly analogous to the way in which empty signifiers, nodal points, and transcendental signifiers are theoretically conceived in poststructuralist approaches to discourse (see e.g. Laclau 1994; Derrida 1967), and which can help to make it possible to translate the ethical and strategic insights of Lacanian practice for the purposes of critical research. For instance, it is absolutely crucial that neither the clinical nor critical analyst should take the meaning of these signifiers in the discourse of the subject at face value. And much in the same way that the psychoanalyst will attend to slippages and contradictions in the discourse of the analysand in order to transferentially tease out their repressed feelings of lack, discourse-analytical techniques—such as problematization, deconstruction, or genealogy, for example—will attend to the discontinuities of a discursive archive or corpus to avoid being seduced by the subject's own self-interpretation of its identity and intentions (c.f. Foucault 1971). Indeed, this is their critical value, the operationalization of which for empirical research is one of the key purposes of the logics approach to critical explanation (Glynos and Howarth 2007).

In Lacan's teaching on the direction of the treatment, however, it is only when the subject's fixation on the desire of the Other represented in the master signifiers has been sufficiently loosened by a process of free association—elicited via the combination of "scansion" and "oracular speech" on the part of the analyst (Fink 1997a, 2007; c.f. Lacan 2006: 438, 516)—that the treatment can progress to its third and final stage, which is the "interpretation" of the fundamental fantasy around which these signifiers (and therefore the analysand's subjectivity as a whole) has coalesced. The process that Lacan delineates possesses not only an epistemological goal therefore but a procedural one too, insofar as its aim is not only to reveal the nature of the

fundamental fantasy on which the subject has become fixated, but to reconfigure the subject's position in relation to the Other and which this fantasy is responsible for constituting (c.f. Fink 1997a: 205, Lacan 2006: 438, Žižek 1997). The problem for Lacan as he perceived it was that contemporary clinical analysts were too quick to leap to the interpretative stage of analysis (stage three) before the imaginary and symbolic dimensions of the analysand's discourse had been sufficiently clarified (stage one), and before their desirous relation to the master signifiers had been adequately dialectized or unfixed (stage two), therefore potentially threatening to reinforce the fantasmatic grip that the Other's desire still had on them as a subject of discourse, and thus the very neuroses for which they had entered analysis in the first place (Lacan 2006: 431, 497).

There is then a procedural dimension to Lacan's direction of the treatment that is not always present in critical research but has important implications for its ethical and strategic success nonetheless. To fully appreciate what these implications might be, it will be necessary to examine in more detail the ways in which the strategic goals of critical and clinical analysis differ and cohere. In preparation for this final stage of the argument, however, we will first discuss the ways in which Lacan's conceptual framework can be applied to the case of the religious right in order to determine the function performed by *Roe v. Wade* in the discourse of white evangelicals. This will better enable us to assess the added ethical and strategic value provided by the application of Lacan in the clinical process.

On the function of *Roe v. Wade* in evangelical discourse

One of the ways in which Lacan's ISR provides an ethical direction to clinical practice is in the matter of whether it is even in the best interests of the analysand to enter treatment in the first place, as it is frequently the neurotic symptom around which their subjective identity has formed, and hence there should be a good reason for seeking its dissolution (Bailly 2013: 178, 194; Lacan 2006: 253). For example, one such reason might be if the symptom has become an obstacle to the

patient's functioning on a day-to-day basis, placing at risk either their immediate interests or self-realisation of long-term goals (Bailly 2013: 183; c.f. Fink 1997a, 2007). This detail can help to provide some ethical direction to critical analysis too, especially in a context of cultural relativity, where earlier normative binaries between subject positions and social groups have been deconstructed and problematized. Who gets to determine which subject positions are deserving of critique and which are not? What are their reasons for doing so and would such ideological critique be in the best interests of the subject themselves? (c.f. Badiou 2001) Even in those cases where the critical research project has a legitimate aim in sight, its strategic ends might not be served best by critically analysing or deconstructing the discursive basis of the subject position in question, because, in so doing, it can frequently lead to precisely the sort of reinforcement of its fantasmatic grip that we are seeking to avoid (c.f. Bloom 2015, Glynos and Howarth 2007).

This last point is especially evident in the case of white evangelicals who have reacted with such aggression to recent political and theological critique (e.g. Butler 2021; du Mez 2021; Gorski and Perry 2022), and have begun to articulate critical terminology such as "deconstruction" or "critical race theory" antagonistically into their discourse, thus consolidating its fantasmatic grip by negating the force of critique (e.g. English 2021, Joyce 2022, Mesa 2021, Olsen 2022). An ethical approach to analysis based on the clinical application of Lacan can help to account for such strategic reversals, but also help critical scholars to evaluate the strategic necessity and nature of the intervention in the first place. For instance, there is a noticeable analogy between the conditions that necessitate clinical treatment and the way in which an "identity crisis" has been articulated in recent evangelical discourse (e.g. Kidd 2019; Labberton 2018; Noll *et al.* 2019). In discourse-analytical terms, we might say that Trump's election succeeded in reactivating a number of the contradictions and inconsistencies that had remained temporarily sutured, but which now threaten to endanger its long-term viability as a subject of political and religious discourse (see Bailey 2018). This presented an opportunity for evangelical leaders to address these inconsistencies, an opportunity on which they were unable to capitalize due to the position that *Roe v. Wade* had

assumed within their political discourse and the antagonism that this created in relation to the Democratic Party (Huntly, forthcoming; c.f. Margolis 2020). Stated bluntly, most evangelicals found the thought of voting for a pro-life candidate far more reprehensible than the thought of voting for one who was demonstrably racist and misogynistic. And while this had previously been (and still is) the basis of their hegemonic alignment with the Republican Party, it had more recently culminated in the alienation of younger evangelicals in the United States and beyond, further putting the long-term viability of the movement in question.

There are similarities then between the self-defeating fixation of white evangelicals on the issue of *Roe v. Wade* and the self-defeating nature of a neurotic symptom that motivates an analysand to seek analysis (c.f. Lacan 2006: 431); but as we observed concerning the subject of clinical analysis, it would be a mistake for the critical analyst to take at face value the master signifiers by which evangelicals have consciously defined their identity. It is unsettling therefore to see this recur throughout the literature on evangelicalism and the religious right in both political science and the sociology of religion, which in the main perceive the subjective identity of evangelicals—based as we have seen around master signifiers such as "bible-believing" and "born again"—as the natural by-product of an essential theological identity (see the review of literature in the opening chapter). This makes it difficult to account adequately for recent developments in their discourse, such as the increasingly enthusiastic support they have shown for Trump since he won the 2016 election or their subsequent embrace of internet conspiracies regarding Covid vaccination and child trafficking; it also inadequately accounts for a number of inconsistencies and contingencies in the historical record, such as the long term support of the black church for the Democratic Party or the peripheral status of pro-life discourse within evangelicalism immediately following *Roe v. Wade* (see paper two).

An effective means by which to operationalize a number of these insights for the purpose of critical research is provided by the logics approach to critical explanation, developed by Jason

Glynos and David Howarth (2007). Drawing on the Foucauldian method of problematization, it enables researchers to "clarify the imaginary and symbolic dimensions" of evangelicals by tracing the breaks and discontinuities in the subject-mediated self-interpretations of their discourse (Glynos and Howarth 2007, Howarth 2005; c.f. Bacchi 2015). But this also draws our attention to the analytical parallels between the Foucauldian method of problematization and the psychoanalytic techniques of Lacanian practice: "What we teach the subject to recognize as his unconscious is his history", says Lacan; "in other words, we help him to complete the current historicization of the facts that have already determined a certain number of historical "turning points" in his existence." (Lacan 2006: 217; c.f. Foucault 1971, 1984) Indeed, I endeavoured to undertake something similar regarding the "turning points" in evangelical history (Carter and Porter 2017), and found that, far from the opposition to abortion being an historical and theological inevitability, evangelicals had previously remained indifferent to the Supreme Court's ruling on *Roe v. Wade* (Huntly, *forthcoming*; c.f. Martin 1996: 193). On the contrary, in the first presidential election following the decision, evangelicals had voted overwhelmingly in support of the Democratic nominee, Jimmy Carter, mainly due to their identification with him as a fellow born-again Christian (Flippen 2011: 18-19). Indeed, it was in voting for Carter that the evangelical community had first achieved wider recognition at a national level as a political subject of note (*Ibid.;* c.f. Woodward 1976). Similar to how the emerging identity of the infant during the mirror stage of development is affirmed by the verbal acknowledgment of an Other, this recognition by the national media constituted the moment when conservative Christians could begin to see themselves as a coherent whole, rather than a dispersal of heterogenous denominations and churches (Hart 2005). And yet the evangelical identification with Carter, like the infant's, was one that primarily existed at the level of the imaginary rather than one which had been constituted within stable symbolic parameters; it was therefore still susceptible to the narcissistic "rejection of small differences" to which it would eventually succumb. As Bailly explains:

It seems to be, among very small children, that it is the small differences that exist between oneself and someone very similar that are least tolerated, perhaps because they raise the question of 'which is the authentic version?' which seems to attack the whole artifice of the ego." (2013: 31; c.f. Fink 1997a: 32)

And, also similarly, the unsatisfactory nature of this imaginary identification would initiate a wider search for meaning in the symbolic dimension regarding their identity as a subject. Evangelicals eventually found a sense of stability in the four master signifiers of the "Bebbington quadrilateral": the Bible ("Bible-believing"), the cross and conversion ("born again"), and Christian activity ("evangelism") (Bebbington 1988; Noll 2018; Noll *et al.* 2019). The difficulty is that our symbolic networks precede and are external to us, and never quite capture the singularity of our subjective experience (for recent critiques of the Bebbington quadrilateral, see Fisher 2016 and Sutton 2017b, as well as the opening chapter of this thesis); not only therefore will they be always essentially contestable, but there will also be "something more" which is "in me more than me" and resists full symbolization (Žižek 1989:204). This "something more" is what Lacanians refer to as the Real cause of desire, or *objet a*, and can lead the subject on an obsessive and unrelenting search for the *thing* that is missing but defines them more than their own master signifier. In the context of political subjectivity, this mechanism provides a basis for the constant contestation and struggle of shifting hegemonic alliances (c.f. Laclau 1990, 1996; Laclau and Zac 1994, Norval 2000; Žižek 1989). And in the case of evangelicals in the 1970s, the "something more" that they could not find in their imaginary identification with Carter, nor the master signifiers of "Bible-believing" and "born again", provided political operatives on the conservative right with an opportunity to align evangelicals with the Republican Party. They did this by casting a chain of equivalence across a range of socially conservative issues that had previously been seen as unrelated —opposition to

Roe v. Wade, for example, but also the issues of school prayer, segregated private schools, and gay rights (see paper two; c.f. Flippen 2011, Martin 1996, Williams 2010).

It is at this point that the method of problematization used in the logics approach provides an orientation analogous to the second stage of Lacanian treatment, the dialectization of master signifiers (or discursive nodal points), bringing to light and reactivating the contingent antagonisms to which evangelicals had responded throughout their recent history. Much in the way that the clinical analyst attends to blockages and slips in the analysand's discourse, I have proceeded to identify the historical dislocations and crises in the discourse of evangelicalism by tracing discontinuities in the ways that it has articulated a series of subject positions, until finally hitting upon something that resembled the traumatic cause (or dislocatory event) on which its status as a political subject had begun to take form. This enabled me to move to the dimension of critical analysis which is most analogous to the final stage in Lacan's direction of the treatment, "interpretation", from which I could risk offering an explanation of the fantasmatic logics by which the evangelical subject had been gripped. It is the fantasmatic logics that provide the logics framework with its critical dimension and force, but it is also that which most resists public official disclosure (Glynos and Howarth 2007: 148). This mirrors to an extent the un-symbolizable nature of fantasy in clinical discourse; however, it can sometimes be discerned in less public or official statements, which equally mirrors the way in which the analyst's speculative interpretations of the fundamental fantasy can be confirmed in the response of the analysand themselves (c.f. Fink 1997a, Bailly 2013). In this way, I was able to piece together a sense of the dislocations and antagonisms represented by the historical "turning points" in evangelical history, and which had contributed to the radically contingent logics of equivalence and difference by which their political identity had been constituted. The conclusion that I arrived at was that it was not evangelical antipathy to *Roe v. Wade* that had formed the basis of their alliance with the Republicans, but the dislocatory threat to their sedimented practices posed by Carter's enforcement of civil rights

legislation —and which had resulted in a threat to the tax-exempt status of their private schools (see paper two; c.f. Balmer 2007, 2021; Martin 1996: 173).

However, it is at this point that the analogy between Lacanian practice and the logics approach can start to diverge, and which is also the source of the ethical and strategic tensions regarding the project of critical research more generally. For in the clinical setting, the interpretation of the fundamental fantasy is ultimately a construction on the part of the analyst in collaboration with the analysand themselves, but which is only produced at the end of an extended process that involves the unfixing of the analysand's desire and reconfiguration of their subject position in relation to that of the Other. Fink describes it like this:

> Truth is not so much 'found' or 'uncovered' by interpretation, as created by it. This does not mean that interpretation is free to invent as it pleases… the surrounding material has to be elucidated and the relationship with the therapist has to be solid. (Fink 1997a: 158-9)

And while this aspect of interpretation is captured to an extent by the concept of articulation within the logics approach (Glynos and Howarth 2007: 38, 165, *passim.*), it is equally the point where the ethical and strategic character of clinical and critical analysis can most visibly differ. This is because the ultimate criteria for the validity of critical articulation is not in its ability to reconfigure the position of the subject in relation to its Real cause of desire but rather in its capacity to make sense of a singular phenomenon as judged by a "tribunal of critical scholars" (*Ibid.*: 39); it is a reformulation of the interpretive stage that is closely analogous to that of Lacan—and performs the necessary task of operationalizing psychoanalytic interpretation for the needs of the modern academy—but is nonetheless crucially different in a number of important ways. To fully appreciate the nature of this theoretical distinction and the implications that it has for critical practice, we will

turn next to a detailed comparison of the strategic ends of analysis as they are conceived in the later work of Lacan and that of critical research.

On the strategic ends of clinical and critical analysis

The practical and strategic endpoint of analysis for the early Lacan was presumably not very different to that of the late, insomuch as it necessitated something akin to bringing to consciousness that which was previously repressed (c.f. Bailly 2013: 194, Fink 1997a: 207). This is generally an event that was originally so anxiety-inducing or traumatic to the analysand that it had resisted full symbolization, producing pathogenic symptoms of neurotic fixation. And yet the way in which it was conceived in the later Lacan is considerably different and reflects the way in which his emphasis regarding the ISR progressively shifted over the course of his career. There must have been a reason for this: despite his reputation as a difficult and abstract thinker, Lacan did not simply theorise for theory's sake, but rather to communicate his clinical insight to analysts in a way that would better serve their ethical and strategic ends. Hence, whereas the manner in which Lacan conceives the analytic goal in his early writings is articulated primarily in terms of the imaginary and symbolic dimensions (c.f. Fink 1997a: 33), his increasing focus on the Real over the course of his career led Lacan to conceive it instead as the crossing or traversal of the fundamental fantasy, around which the subject's position in relation to the desire of the Other had become pathologically fixated (c.f. *Ibid.*: 205; Lacan 2006: 431, 428, *passim*).

Admittedly there is surprisingly little elaboration or discussion in either the primary or secondary literature as to what this endpoint might look like in practice (Bailly 2013:178); but while Lacan's own statements on the topic are typically elusive (*Ibid.*: 181; Lacan 1958: 535, *passim.*), what little we do know on the matter is nonetheless suggestive. Take the way Fink applies it in his own clinical practice, as the "subjectification" of the Other's desire as a means of making it one's own (1997a: 56), a Lacanian reading of Freud's "*Wo Es war…*" as "Where it was… I must come into

being" (*Ibid.*: 243). Indeed, it is not dissimilar to the classical resolution of the Oedipus, but articulated in less biologically essentialist terms, making the name of the father an active metaphor for deferred satisfaction; but it is a metaphor that is no longer fixated on the missing dimension of the Real which is lost in symbolic castration. In so doing, it renders this last a secondary-order metaphor for future challenges and crises that the subject might face, whereas previously this relation had been reversed, and where all dislocations and crises faced by the subject had become a reminder of the original, un-symbolizable trauma of the Other's desire. The distinction is a subtle one and expresses less the alteration of symbolic content than a shift in the way that the subject is positioned *in relation* to that content:

> The goal remains to separate from the Other, and to enable the subject to pursue his or her course without all the inhibitions and influences that derive from concrete others around the subject or the internalized Other's values and judgements. (*Ibid.*: 207; c.f. 1997a: 65)

In the case of white evangelicals in North America, therefore, it might mean that the master signifiers around which their subject identity had historically been constituted, such as "bible-believing" or "born again", are not dispensed with entirely, but rather that they are no longer motivated by the unspeakable trauma of a previous dislocation or crisis. This, I have suggested, is related to the threat of racial integration experienced in the 1970s, which has hitherto resisted public official discourse, manifesting instead in the reproduction and tolerance of racist policies and political candidates in the name of reversing *Roe v. Wade.*

For Fink, that which is "unspeakable" must be put into words: "Once spoken, the fixation [can begin] to give way." (*Ibid.*: 158) This gives the subject a new freedom to either make the Other's desire their own or else to reject it. Under these conditions, evangelicals could have a renewed capacity to reinterpret or articulate their master signifiers according to an alternative set

of logics without the feeling that they are somehow betraying the desire of the Other; but they will be equally free not to reinterpret them if that is what they truly desire. The difference will be that the decision is one that will be consciously made rather than one that resists public official disclosure. It will therefore be subject to open deliberation and debate by those within and outside the community.

We have arrived at the point where we are able to elucidate more fully the ethical and strategic ramifications of Lacanian practice. Stated clearly: if interpretation (stage three) occurs too soon in the direction of the treatment before the analysand's imaginary and symbolic relations have been clarified (stage one), then, even if the interpretation is accurate, it will not succeed in repositioning the subject in relation to the desire of the Other. On this point, it is worth quoting Bailly in full:

> Obviously, a wrong interpretation will not work, but nor will a correct one if it is not couched in the right signifiers and delivered at precisely the right moment. An analyst may see some truth about the patient according to his/her theoretical system, but until the patient can see the same truth couched in the terms of his/her own reality, it is useless; after all, meaning can only be realised in the Subject's own construction of the signifying chain. (Bailly 2013: 197)

On the contrary, it might instead risk reinforcing the analysand's existing fixation on the desire of the Other. This is because a mistimed or misjudged interpretation risks positioning the analyst as an imaginary other in relation to that of the analysand. At best, this can result in the positive identification with the analyst at an imaginary level, which does little to reconfigure their position in relation to the desire of the Other; at worst, it may result in the narcissistic and aggressive rejection of the analyst as a potential competitor to the Other, and for whom their pitiful attempts

at interpretation warrant no consideration at all (c.f. Fink 1997: 32). Applied to the case of white evangelicals, we can see something similar in their early support of Carter, when they initially identified with him at an imaginary (and therefore narcissistic) level as "one of their own". However, Carter's failure to articulate this identity symbolically as a viable subject of discourse led to what otherwise could be seen as a disproportionately aggressive rejection following the IRS crackdown on private religious schools.

Alternatively, if the analysis proceeds to the interpretive stage before it has dialectized the desire of the analysand in relation to their master signifiers (stage two), then the analyst risks positioning themselves instead in the position of the symbolic (or "big") Other—that is, as the symbolic arbiter of knowledge—without sufficiently reconfiguring the obsessive manner in which the subject has previously positioned itself in relation to it. Applied to the case of white evangelicals, therefore, it could be argued that this describes the way in which they have frequently related to the latest celebrity televangelist or megachurch pastor, as well as to the populist strategies of politicians such as Ronald Reagan or Donald Trump (see Hardy 2021; c.f. Laclau 2005, Moffitt 2020, Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017). It is for this reason that Lacanian analysts are taught not to position themselves in relation to the analysand in the position of an imaginary or symbolic other, but rather always in the position of the Real. Strictly speaking, this cannot be in the position of an "other" at all—the non-symbolizable nature of the Real resisting any such individuation—but will instead assume the only form that the Real can take following the act of symbolic castration: the *objet a,* or Real cause of desire (Fink 1997a). It is only in so doing that the analysis will be able to dialectize the fixed and fixated nature of the subject's desire sufficiently enough to reconfigure its position in relation to the desire of the Other.

This can explain to some extent the force and vehemence with which evangelicals have reacted to attempts to deconstruct or critique their practices and beliefs (e.g. English 2021, Joyce 2022, Mesa 2021, Olsen 2022), but it can also indicate some ways in which the ethical and strategic

insights of Lacanian practice might be further applied to the purpose of critical research. The psychoanalytic orientation of the logics approach does this better than most, I believe, by stating explicitly that which remains implicit in other critical frameworks: that the interpretation of problematized phenomena is a discursive articulation, the validity of which depends on its relation to an other (Glynos and Howarth, *op. cit.*). In the most part this will be constituted by a community of scholars or relevant policy makers and practitioners, but rarely will it be the community itself that is the object of critique. Indeed, were they to read the analyst's findings, they would possibly respond in a manner not dissimilar to that of white evangelicals.

This is because such interpretations can only be received by the subject in question as those of an imaginary or symbolic other, rather than the product of a collaborative analysis in which the analysand has taken an active role and the analyst that of the *objet a*; for it is only this that can result in a reconfiguration of the subject's position in relation to its Real and traumatic cause of desire (Fink 1997a: 65, 159). As the preceding discussion has attempted to establish in the case of clinical analysis and evangelical discourse, an analytical approach that does not realistically aim at such a result will not only be strategically ineffective but counter-productive to the aims of critical research. In short, it may contribute something towards an academic understanding of the world, but it will do very little to actually change it, a situation with which anyone who takes seriously their role as critical scholar cannot fail to be dissatisfied.

Conclusion

How then do we operationalize these insights for the purposes of critical discursive research? I believe that the preceding discussion indicates at least two interrelated principles by which critical research might be guided. Firstly, to avoid the subject from relating to the analysis in the position of an imaginary other, it will need to be a process in which they are actively involved and which enables them to recognize and clarify the imaginary and symbolic elements within their wider

discourse —stage one in the direction of the treatment—rather than to be presented with any findings as a *fait accompli* in which they have not actively participated. This is the point made by Fink when he says:

> If *interpretation creates truth*, the ground has to be prepared for it… the surrounding material has to be elucidated and the relationship with the therapist has to be solid. Otherwise it has no more than shock value (at best). (Fink 1997a: 159; author's own emphasis.)

To an extent, this insight is operationalized in the logics approach by its use of subject-mediated self-interpretations, but the argument here suggests that the final act of critique must also be undertaken within the community itself, or at least by a researcher who is accepted as such. This brings to mind the concept of the organic intellectual in Gramsci (1971), but also the way in which certain types of action research methods have been built on the radical pedagogical theories of Paulo Freire.[5] Recent work by Joanildo Burity on evangelicals in Brazil indicates the potential for which such methods might be articulated within a post-Marxist framework (e.g. Burity 2020, 2022, 2024; c.f. Machado and Burity 2014), and it is possible to imagine something similar in the context of evangelicalism in the United States too.

This leads to the second principle implied by the preceding discussion: in order to avoid the subject relating to the analyst from the position of symbolic Other, it must also be a process that is conducted in a discursive register that the subject finds meaningful, rather than a technical vocabulary from which they are excluded. This is the point made by Bailly:

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[5] There is something in the way Freire defines the concept of *conscientização* as, "making it possible for people to enter the historical process as responsible Subjects", that strongly resonates with the way clinical practitioners such as Fink and Bailly define the process of "subjectification" in Lacan (Freire 1970: 10) The translator's note in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* makes this connection still clearer: "The term *Subjects* denotes those who know and act, in contrast to *objects*, which are known and acted upon." (*Ibid.*)

An analyst may see some truth about the patient according to his/her theoretical system, but until the patient can see the same truth couched in the terms of his/her own reality, it is useless; after all, meaning can only be realised in the Subject's own construction of the signifying chain. (Bailly 2013: 197)

Nor should the results of the analysis deconstruct the subject's discourse beyond all meaningful use in future but should instead reconfigure the subject's position in relation to the trauma it has attempted to suture. Taken together, these recommendations point towards an increasingly collaborative process internal to the community in question, and which actively involves the participation of the subject in a discourse that they find meaningful and familiar. Admittedly, this may result in a style of critique unlike that to which we have become accustomed. In the case of evangelicalism, for example, it might take the form of political theology, a Protestant sermon, or even charismatic prophecy—forms that, while distinct from conventional academic analysis, could prove far more effective in shifting discursive structures from within. If so, it will be no bad thing. Indeed, in Lacanian terms, it would be closer to the discourse of the analyst than to that of the university, or, in Gramscian, to that of the organic intellectual rather than the traditional.

Concluding Remarks

In part due to the way that the structure of the thesis has followed the problem-driven orientation of the logics approach, there is little more that can be added to the conclusions I have stated in the preceding three papers or the critical reflections formulated by the third. Indeed, the final section of paper three has perhaps stated as clearly as I can the point at which I have arrived with regards to the place and function of critical research, as well as the direction I believe that it could be taken in the near future. In this concluding section, therefore, I will be content to restate the key findings of these papers in relation to my initial aims, before turning to what I think these might imply for future research— both for me personally and for critical research within related fields and themes.

I began this project with a set of questions which have been articulated and re-articulated in different ways over the weeks, months, and years following the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States: why did so many evangelicals support him? Why did they continue to do so? Will they always do so? But more specifically: why did the identity crisis precipitated by Trump not in fact lead to an alteration in the political alignment between evangelical Christians and the Republican Party? I believe the preceding papers have provided an answer to these questions in the way that they have problematized and critiqued the social, political, and fantasmatic logics underpinning evangelical discourse both contemporary and historical.

The first paper provided the grounds for this process by examining the way in which Trump had been constituted as a problem in the evangelical community by leaders and representatives of its foremost institutions. To do this, it drew on the method of problematization developed by the logics approach while drawing upon a range of poststructuralist analytical

methods derived from Laclau and Mouffe, Foucault, and Lacan. It found that Trump had succeeded in reactivating many of the inconsistencies and contingencies inherent to evangelical discourse but that the full force of this dislocation had been provisionally sutured by a dominant problematization of "theological unity" that did little to reconfigure the logics that had led to Trump's election in the first place. In so doing, I suggested that the mainstream of evangelicalism had effectively opted for the immediate security of their sedimented social practices over its long-term survival as a viable subject of religious and political discourse. I could only conclude that the prospect of voting for a political candidate widely perceived as racist and misogynist, even by those within their own community, proved less dislocatory to their subject identity and sedimented practices than voting for one who was pro-choice on abortion.

The psychoanalytic dimensions implicit in this conclusion provided analytical direction in regard to the following two papers. I took my methodological cues in this respect from the constructive criticism made by Slavoj Žižek in the field of early post-Marxism. Namely, that for political critique to be effective, it should contain at least two complementary dimensions: a discursive-hegemonic and psychoanalytic-fantasmatic (Žižek 1989: 140; c.f. Glynos and Howarth 2007). In the second paper, therefore, I conducted the discourse-hegemonic component of this analysis in relation to the formation of the religious right. The context in which I situated this intervention was in response to the thesis of a religious divide in US politics, which has been repeated widely throughout a great deal of social science research. I criticized this thesis for its underlying essentialism and inability to account for apparent contradictions and inconsistencies in the historical record, but principally because it leads to a position of political intractability by reinforcing the very logic that it should be seeking to interrogate. I emphasised the need for an alternative approach that can more adequately account for the discontinuities and radical contingencies of the phenomena in question and that did not simply accept uncritically the self-interpretations of the subjects themselves. This I said can be found in the post-Marxist approach of Laclau and Mouffe, the value of which I demonstrated by applying it to a key moment in the

articulation of evangelical identity as part of an emergent religious right: the articulation of a conservative evangelical position on abortion by Jerry Falwell and the Moral Majority. Contrary to the perception that this was an inevitable product of traditional evangelical values and theology in relation to *Roe v. Wade*, I proceeded to demonstrate that abortion had in fact been peripheral within evangelical discourse prior to Falwell's intervention, and that the motivating factor instead was likely the dislocation experienced by evangelicals following a threat to their sedimented practices. The Carter administration had instigated an investigation into the tax-free status of their private schools and colleges, which were still *de facto* segregated, the outcome of which could potentially force white evangelicals either to integrate their own institutions of private education or re-integrate their offspring into the public school system. The function of abortion in evangelical discourse therefore was to articulate a chain of equivalence between the subject position of white evangelicals and pro-life Catholic activists in order to remove Jimmy Carter from office and elect Ronald Reagan, but it subsequently came to define the movement as something of a "litmus test" in regards to their political and religious identity (Martin 1996: 193)— something that was more biblical than the Bible even, or more evangelical than the evangel, in the manner of the Lacanian *objet a*.

This explains the force and grip that it continues to exert on their political subjectivity today. Where the discursive nature of this stage in the critique highlighted the historical contingency of this development, the psychoanalytic aspect of its conclusion suggests that its successful resolution will not be achieved by discourse-hegemonic analysis alone and will require something akin to a psychoanalytic intervention, but one which takes place at a political or collective level. Indeed, there is a psychoanalytical dimension to all three papers, but it was only in the third that I began to address it at length. This necessitated an in-depth consideration of the psychoanalytic literature on Freud and Lacan from both a critical and clinical perspective and led to a number of critical reflections regarding the ethical and strategic position of psychoanalysis in critical discursive research. My starting point for these reflections was the suspicion that critical

discursive research too often succeeds in reinforcing the very political and fantasmatic logics that it seeks to contest. Specifically, in the case of white evangelicals in the United States, I was conscious of the way in which they had reacted to recent ideological critiques of their beliefs and practices (e.g. Butler 2021, du Mez 2021, Gorski and Perry 2022) and which was particularly evident in the position they had taken to explicitly discursive formulations around critical race theory, deconstruction, and postcolonialism (see e.g. English 2021, Joyce 2022, Mesa 2021, Olsen 2022). My close critical reading of the clinical literature led me to perceive the aims of analysis as procedural as much as they were interpretative, which further led to a series of reflections in regard to what this might mean in the context of critical research. I arrived at the conclusion that to avoid the risk of ethical and strategic reversal, the process of critique should ideally be collaborative and internal to the community in question and involve the subject in a discourse that they find meaningful and familiar. This may result in a style of critique to which we are currently unaccustomed, but which would nonetheless be more ethically oriented and strategically effective.

This is the point at which I am at now. I believe the conclusions articulated by the preceding three papers provide a critical explanation in response to the questions posed at the start of this chapter and at the very start of the thesis. The reason that the experience of dislocation precipitated by trump did not fully develop into an organic crisis or the disarticulation of white evangelicals from the republican religious right is due to the function that is performed in their discourse by their antagonism to *Roe v. Wade*, and around which their political subjectivity has largely been formed. The fantasmatic character of this function suggests that the grip it still has will almost certainly not be alleviated by its satisfaction as a political demand, but that its force will be displaced to other antagonists and other demands in time. Indeed, this is precisely what we are beginning to see happening. The reversal of the Supreme Court decision on *Roe v. Wade* in 2022 did not lead to the satiation of their desire but has redoubled it toward a multitude of alternative targets—critical race

theory, for example, postcolonial history and school textbooks about slavery, the LGBTQ+ community, World Health Organization, Covid vaccinations, and so on—that can provide an unscrupulous politician with a multitude of potential demands by which to leverage support once again. Trump may or may not be the next Republican candidate, or even the next American president, but the problem he signifies in the discourse of evangelicalism will not disappear when his political career is over. The crisis will continue.

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